RICARDO G. CURCI

BATTLES AGAINST THE WALLS

For grandparents Lucia Ventura and Saverio Curci

“The smell grows, the smell flutters like a butterfly, black and green, While everyone pretends not to feel it. I have to create a small, shattered world with just a broken nail and a new dress .”

Juan Carlos Onetti

PREFACE

ANDWe are at war.

Publishing a book of short stories these days might be seen by some as a blatant act of boasting, as blatant as ignoring, or even despising, the ultimate sacrifice being made by the combatants in the South Atlantic. For me, however, there are no longer any reasons for fear or remorse. The military government will fall, sooner or later, and it is now nothing more than a sad and offensive parody, not to say caricature, of what it once aspired to be. And from those who have opposed me all these years, for my pro-government stance, even for my crimes, as they've claimed, I may receive even more blows for this publication, but one more stain doesn't affect the tiger, and it doesn't hurt it either. One is what one is, one is what one chose to be.

If this book were a testimony, a document, an essay on reality, no one would attack me. But it is a work of fiction, at least to some extent. Therefore, publishing fiction, supposedly lighthearted and entertaining, in these times would deserve the disapproval of every citizen conscious of their civic and moral duty in a nation that has boasted since its independence of being one of the most cultured in America.

Just over a month ago, a woman was raped and murdered in Buenos Aires. It happened on April 2nd, the very day of the supposed recovery of the islands. Like so many other cases, the press covered it for a few days, only to forget it afterward. I wrote a short story about her many years ago. That woman died alone in her apartment, while much of the country celebrated the boasts of a drunkard. That's what prompted me to publish the rest of the stories.

But precisely because it is a work of fiction, the themes it covers, the totality of the conflicts, the breadth of its social, historical and psychological references involve everything related to humanity, war and social conflict, including, also, the limits of morality and the fallacy of feelings.

I feel I must justify myself, and so I am, even though no one is asking me to. Guilt is a crow that cannot be killed, an indelible stain on a garment we cannot remove without being left naked. And the nakedness, in this case, is more terrible than the stain.

Literary fiction is a kind of expiation. Take the Bible, for example. What is it, if not a collection of allegories and fables, symbols that attempt to explain what can only be understood through unwritten laws? These stories are also like tales for children who have grown up without maturing, because the characters grow up without resolving any of their conflicts. They live with them, evade them, are dragged along by them, and, on rare occasions, are dominated by them, until they are ultimately defeated by them.

My written crimes are in these stories.

Only one person could have understood and appreciated them, and it is for her that I have written them. Gloria Sanmarco disappeared several years ago. She was a schoolteacher, though she was only able to teach for a very short time. A car took her away, and she vanished into the sunny streets of a city.

Since then the sun is a shadow, and peace is war.

I've lived there ever since. That's why this book of stories is an expression of humanity's struggles. It's a tribute, neither frivolous nor fictional. Decadent, perhaps. Cowardly, certainly. Because even feelings succumb to the web of hypocrisy. The human mind is a cemetery, a poet friend of mine used to say.

I expose my soul to punishment. Let the detractors of sentimentality come and attack me, they will be right. Let the defenders of reality come, and they will be welcome. But I will give my blessedness to the mediocre, the failures, and the criminals, who could be nothing else in the perpetual daily war, in the perennial pains that corrode the foundations of individuality. For them I have written this book: the hypocrites despite themselves, the liars immersed in the endless cycle of regret, the murderers surrounded by columns of fire. Because there is no escape, the ground is mud, and there are no handrails reaching down from the sky. A bullet kills a rotting body; its epitaph is memory. A word wreaks havoc, leaving infamy as its heir, and infamy never dies.

The only place where it is impossible to be deceived is in the luminous imagination. It tolerates and encompasses everything. Imagination is a nest of hawks that hunt the rats of uncertainty, circling in concentric circles that sometimes spin centrifugally or centripetally, but in both ways it expands toward outer or inner infinity.
Imagination is not something that is invented, but something that can be seen in the interfaces of everyday life.
Those who read well understand that conflicts are born in the chiaroscuro, that the breeding ground for tragedies lies in the gray areas, that traumas we try to get rid of resurface from the bottom of a calm, dark well.
I invite you to take a look at that world, and those who are not afraid of being annihilated, to enter it and be a part of it.

Bautista Beltrame
"The Buenos Aires Radar"

THE USURPERS

1

I met her in a bar in Once, on Jean Jaurés Street, half a block from Rivadavia Avenue. The Sarmiento railway tracks were right there, running between high walls connected by short, narrow bridges. Cars came and went, and you could stop on the pedestrian walkway and look down at the trains passing by. It was the first time I'd been to that bar, outside the usual haunts my family, especially Uncle Ángel, advised me to stay. They had it in for me, that's what he told me, and they were watching me. That's why I slipped away from the upscale neighborhood where the bars, clubs, and brothels were, the places where the military officers used to hang out, and plunged into the expressionless crowds of the working-

class neighborhoods. There, in the middle of the Once train station, its corners sown with the deadly seeds of vagrants and beggars, the corners of Cangallo and Pueyrredón teeming with prostitutes who dispersed towards Miserere Square and the semi-abandoned, semi-hidden area—those blocks before the station where the wide pit of the tracks was impossible to cross except by the few pedestrian bridges, forcing long walks or bus detours. Streets half-dead from five in the afternoon, especially in winter, and completely dead at night, except, of course, for the nocturnal ticks and the cats that try to avoid them. I'm talking, of course, about the homeless lounging on the sidewalks, the prostitutes wandering wearily, transvestites included, and the night owls walking with their hands in their pockets and a cigarette between their lips, their faces haggard, wearing an old overcoat if it's winter, or a t-shirt with the YPF logo that reeks of gasoline, just like the breath and hands of those men, who perhaps aren't men at all, but mere skeletons dominated by anxiety, scratching their crotches in pure excitement, touching their buttocks and sniffing their hands to confirm what they already know: the indelible filth of underwear they don't change because their heads aren't up to it. And then there are the curious, those who once or twice seek out the famous grime of the suburbs, sung about in old tangos, things that no longer exist. The smell lingers, and the attraction of the cobblestones or asphalt, of the urine in the gutters, of the cats that cross the sidewalk swiftly and mysteriously, and above all that, the walls of the old houses, the gates with padlocks and the entryways full of leaves and garbage, where you don't know if there are people alive or dead.
Thinking about all this, I went into the bar and the disco music was blasting. Donna Summer, maybe, which felt like a parody in a place that was nothing more than a recycled warehouse or storage room. It was a time of drugs and dollars, the last of them, I think. We Ansaldis are forward-thinking and intelligent, and although I wasn't exactly the one thinking about all that—the homeland, the future, and politics—my family was certainly an expert at surviving in the best way possible. Soon, with the war looming, which the whole family considered the great disaster, the immense black maw that threatened to devour the virtues of the holocaust of all the past years, the long dictatorship of back and forth, of economic fallacies, of the World Cup—Olympic, ancestral, and divine, enormous and soporific to good manners, especially to the fragile human conscience. The

war was the apotheosis of a general who defied the prevailing military policy, the sacred laws proclaimed in the Military Circle, enshrined on fine wooden desks and signed with Parker pens, while the sound of the pen's touch on paper faded beneath the rasping of the old colonels. Cancer swarmed through those cloisters, too, the dying prostates that scattered cancerous cells as they once had their lifeblood.

But the no-longer-so-young general, then serving as president of the republic, paid no heed. He clung to his delusional idea: to seize the islands that were Argentine in name only, amidst the tangled web of historical documents that no one could decipher with any precision. It was a swan song, but the legendary bird the general was trying to emulate was, so they said, staggering from sheer drunkenness, its long neck bent over the water it must have believed to be the South Atlantic. And its song was not the sound of an oboe, of course, but the cracked cough of a frustrated man, an ordinary man, who, precisely because he was that—a man and frustrated—a bestial symbiosis, an implacable destiny, an irremediable sentence, and a terrible hurricane of ills, unleashed catastrophe upon the country. And the ruins lingered and spread, growing for many years.

But who could possibly know all this? Mere conjectures of my own, thoughts that danced to the rhythm of the music, which kept stopping because the DJ must have been some half-drugged kid arguing, probably, with a girl who was reveling in making him wait, in arousing him even more, until she, giving in, let him do it right there on the balcony where the equipment was, a short distance from the tin roof, dangerously exposed to short circuits from the overloaded outlets. And while that lasted, the music would continue its journey: the brilliant Donna, or the cumbia that was just beginning to wreak havoc. Nobody knew me around there; I'd decided to change my solitary ways for a while. Sometimes I'd go to some bars in Flores, but they were so full of Peruvians and Bolivians that I felt out of place and condemned to judge despite my feeble efforts to the contrary. So I'd go out to the sidewalk, walk many blocks to Villa Luro , and go into the adult movie theater until it closed. The guys sat on the drum set next to me and held out their hands. Sometimes I paid attention to them, sometimes I didn't. The boredom, in the end, was the same.

But in this bar in Once, there were many women in their thirties, and that's what interested me. Not the teenage girls who were looking for a kind of

experience to tell their friends about, or someone who, unlike the boys their age, had money to indulge their more or less innocent whims: a trendy skirt, some suede boots, or a room in a nearby hotel. Blondes or brunettes, skinny or busty, the essential thing was that they didn't talk, because if they did, the whole charade would collapse. The essential thing, I repeat, was that they use their mouths for something more useful.
Sitting on the bar stool, a porrón in my hand, I scanned the barely virginal behinds swaying to the music. Some brushed past me, others slipped away.
Did you find anything interesting?
A woman was talking to me, leaning against the bar. She had dyed brown hair, for sure, but at least it wasn't the blonde that had already left me indifferent. With the play of light coming and going across her face, tracing her body, she sometimes looked like a redhead, sometimes brunette, sometimes the color of an almond tree.
"Nothing," I replied.
- What a shame! I'm in the same boat as you.
"So what are you looking for?" I asked, now looking her straight in the eye. She had started drinking from my beer.
-Nothing special, you know. Just passing the time.
"Damn," I said, "it's not worth getting out of bed and dressing up like you for that, so..."
She was wearing a black short-sleeved t-shirt with little stars forming an arc over her breasts, which were quite nice, or at least they seemed to be. A denim miniskirt showed off her legs, which looked good, apparently, in the dim lighting of the place. She had a pretty face, nothing extraordinary, but a face with a certain... how to put it?... intelligence. She was looking for what people look for in that place and on those nights, but she wasn't going to settle for just anything.
-Finish, what's the point?
"Sexy," I said, laughing at the cliché, not realizing that in Recoleta money and education were exempt from the same ten commandments.
-Thanks, but it's the same old outfit. Is this your first time here?
-Yes, can you see it on my face?
"Nooo!" he said, covering his mouth with his hand. "Just the clothes, all dressed up, as we say in my town, because I'm from Baradero, I came here

years ago." He looked me up and down and made a funny face. "Expensive jeans, nice boots, the little penguin polo shirt..."
-And with all that, have you already formed an idea of what I'm like?
-Well, it helps a lot. Was it right? You tell me.
He left the porrón at the bar and rested a hand on the seat of my bar stool. He seemed to be sniffing me.
-A very fine perfume, nothing like Colbert or Old Spice.
I laughed, of course. The girl was fast and spoke well. Not bad for a change.
"What's your name?" I asked him.
-Claudia. You must be an Anchorena, and you spent more than half your life in Europe.
He started walking his fingers around in the palm of my hand.
"You're a failure at psychic readings," I told her. "I'm barely from La Plata, Claudia, and who even knows my last name?"
-It occurs to me that you're a loose cannon, but hey, there are those in every family, you don't need to have money to be a bum.
- Is that how you see me? As one of those guys who go around looking for women until they're in their fifties, or until they can't anymore, and then they die alone in bed, of a heart attack, and they find them days later, already half rotten?
He looked at me with frightened eyes.
-As they say in Baradero, "you said it." And now who's the fortune teller of himself?
- Don't you know yourself?
He looked around, people dancing, couples squeezing each other in the corners.
-I think I've made a mistake, or am I in a philosophy seminar?
We ordered more alcohol—vodka, I think, and then rum—and a whiskey that ended up knocking her out. She threw herself on top of me, she was dizzy and speaking in a nasal voice.
-I'll take you home, Claudia.
-No, no, let me sit down for a while, it'll pass. I'm not used to it, you know?
She opened her eyes, watching me as if she expected me to laugh at what she'd said. I could have, of course; such a corny phrase suggested either ignorance or dishonesty. It was neither. It was her small-town soul

escaping Buenos Aires that night. I led her to a table and we sat down. I stroked her arms and began kissing her. She slipped off her high heels and lifted one foot up my leg, up my thigh, and settled it between my legs. My testicles were already hard, and she, rather than just hinting, was arousing me, making me want to take her right there. The miniskirt was nothing, and her underwear a scrap of cloth that easily revealed what was truly interesting.
Some people glanced at us as they passed by, stopped for a few seconds, and then continued on their way. Claudia suddenly grabbed my hands tightly and said:
-Wait, wait a minute...
- What's happening?
-I don't know your name.
I laughed in his face, I couldn't help it.
- So what? Is that a condition?
I kissed her hard, whispering dirty things she might not have heard before. I saw her eyes: scared, amazed, excited.
-But your name, dear.
- And you?
"I already told you, Claudia." He was panting, but he wouldn't let go of my hands. "Claudia Pereyra, the most vulgar one, you see?"
"It doesn't matter, the Pereyras, the Pereyras..." I uttered a prayer almost in ecstasy, while kissing her and groping any part of her body I could find under the table. She was sweating.
- And you?
And just as I was about to say my name, the crash sounded.

They'd been raiding bars since... how long? Always and everywhere, but especially in cities where the most politically active student centers and leftist committees were known to be. Córdoba, Rosario, La Plata, where the surrounding vacant lots were a haven for corpses. And Buenos Aires was the epicenter. The raids were limited to bars in middle-class neighborhoods because that's where revolutionary ideas were being cultivated. The middle class was moderately educated, the one that could read half a book by Marx, and that was enough for a lifelong conversion. And first, protesting, and making a fuss about public issues, and then taking up arms.

During the raids, they demanded identification, which almost no one carried. They gathered the documents on two or three cell phones and locked them up at the corresponding police stations for a night or two, under the pretext of background checks. All night long, it was a parade of boys and girls, mostly minors, dipping their fingers in the ink stamp and having their fingerprints taken. Almost all of them were released in the morning, but those with suspicious faces, perhaps with questionable behavior, or who simply hadn't made a good impression on the officers on duty, were held for several days until a relative came to claim them. In this way, many enemies were made. Sometimes, two hundred people were detained to search for, or simply to justify, the identification and arrest of someone they were pursuing with particular interest. There were accidents, stray bullets; they all disappeared. We all knew the detention sites, Quinta Seré, for example, or the Madariaga fields, where kilometers and kilometers of unknown bodies lay underground.

The noise, then, was caused by the metal gates, torn down by the squad that was now entering the bowling alley and firing into the air. Pieces of masonry and splinters of wood fell from the ceiling; people screamed, ran, or threw themselves to the floor if they had heard the orders of the corporal in charge.

Claudia and I threw ourselves to the floor. I already knew what was going to happen, and I realized she did too. “Not again,” I heard her say, her mouth pressed to the floor, and me on top of her, covering her as if I wanted to protect her. She was drunk and was half-laughing at the situation. I told her to be quiet, not to provoke them, and that if they didn't take her to the police station, she should trust me. She hiccuped, laughed, and said, “Yes, dear.”

The soldiers were pulling people up at gunpoint or dragging them toward the exit. Some young men, emboldened by alcohol, resisted and tried to throw futile punches. They were finished off with a rifle butt and thrown inside the police van.

Two boots stopped in front of us.

"Up, damn it!" said the corporal.

"We're here, officer, we're here," I said. "The young lady is drunk and can't stand up without my help." Then, when I looked at his face, I recognized

him. It was General Saravia's youngest son, a friend of my family, and a close confidant of Uncle Ángel.
- What are you doing here, old man?
- What do you want? Just for a change…
"And change shells," she said, looking at Claudia, who was rubbing her eyes. If she had heard, she wasn't offended. But then she looked at me again, frightened, or rather intrigued.
-Sit here, wait for me, I'll take you home.
Saravia and I moved a few meters away amidst the fallen chairs, almost in darkness because the lights had been broken by the gunfire, and we talked.
-Do you know about tomorrow?
"Of course," I told him. "Everyone knows."
"It's a victory for the general, isn't it? The country is with us again. They're gathering people to take to the plaza."
-Is that what this raid is for?
-Sure, we put them all in the dungeons and release them in the square, with a warning, of course.
"Yes, of course," I repeated, almost echoing myself. I knew that at least half of those they had arrested in the capital and provinces would obey without question, even if they weren't intimidated. The death toll had been rising for quite some time.
"Well, Tomás. See you tomorrow, old man. You know where we are. Good luck with the victim," she said, laughing as she grabbed my crotch. She was still eager for me, and she wasn't going to leave me alone until she got her fill.
I went back to Claudia.
"Aren't you giving us a ride?" she asked, clutching her head. It ached, and the hangover was starting. But the night was still young. I helped her up, but she fell asleep as soon as she leaned against me. I had to drag her barefoot; her shoes had vanished somewhere in the club. I laid her down in the back seat of the car. The Ghia started up, but I'd just realized I didn't know her address. If I took her to my apartment, the doorman would tell my uncle, and I didn't want any more trouble. Outside, he'd told me, "Sleep with whoever you want, but don't bring them home." "Yes, Uncle," I said, "I've been on probation for a long time." "And you'd better keep it up, Tomás. Your old man, my dear, was like a brother to me." "Yes, Uncle, yes,

you saved me. Without you, I'd be in jail. Without you, Uncle, my life would be worthless. Without you, Uncle, the country would fall apart."
I searched Claudia's purse for some document. There it was, luckily. She was a grown woman who never went out without her ID, even if it was hidden in her underwear. That wasn't the case here, but there it was. Sarmiento Street, near the Abasto market. Very close. And the keys were in her purse, along with her little cosmetics case and the box of pills, various colors, one of which would stop any dangerous sperm that infiltrated the entity of her private apartment. The anonymous pill, like any good, well-intentioned assassin.
It was the third floor of an old building, with a cage elevator that creaked in the middle of the night at three in the morning. We crossed the hallway, she murmuring in her sleep, me searching for the right key. The doormat was kicked up by her feet and landed near the stairs, where it would stay until morning. No doubt some of the neighbors' doors were peering in, their eyes fixed on us.
Inside, I laid her on the bed, took off her clothes, and went to the bathroom, as old as the building itself, with rusty fixtures but tiles so sturdy they weren't made anymore. The medicine cabinet was full of odds and ends for a woman living alone: used lipsticks, sanitary napkins, used cotton balls, toilet paper on the floor, bottles of unlabeled pills, combs of different sizes, and shards of broken mirrors. In the bathtub, bras and panties hung from the faucets and the showerhead. I pushed my way through those curtains of underwear, undressed, and took a shower. I went back to the bedroom. Claudia was watching me.
- How are you?
-I feel like throwing up, but it'll pass.
He looked at me with a certain confusion.
- What's happening?
-Nothing.
She stared at a naked man in her bedroom, a man she'd met two hours earlier, who had perhaps gotten her drunk, and who was undoubtedly just another soldier, judging by the familiarity with which she'd seen him act that night. But none of that was entirely true. No one had forced her to drink too much, or to talk to that man, or to grope him. That was why the neighbors were judging her. They would have seen us coming in the middle

of the night, amidst the din of the elevator, heavy footsteps, inevitable laughter, and the jingling of keys. But tomorrow wouldn't come until tomorrow.
Claudia sat on the bed, took my hands, and placed them on her nipples. Then she rested her head on my pelvis, just leaning against it, and I felt her cry a little, just a little. Then we made love, if you can call it that. She hadn't asked my name again. She probably didn't care anymore.

2

My relationship with women is ambiguous, inconsistent, I might even say nonexistent. There's my mother's story to explore this topic, but that will come later. First, I must talk about Laura Casas.
She was the daughter of the baker in the neighborhood where we lived in La Plata. I grew up watching her grow up at the same time as me, but we didn't hang out. She went to public school, while I was sent to the military academy, first in La Tablada, then in El Palomar during high school. Dad drove me there and back every day because by then he'd been discharged for supposedly violent acts that he never wanted to explain to us, until we saw him do the same thing at home. But of course, that's another part of the story. The point is that Laura moved with complete ease among the boys in the neighborhood, who were the majority. The other girls didn't go out to play in the afternoons, and although there was a lot of talk about Lidia Cortez and little was known for sure, she behaved almost like an adult.
Laura grew up playing street games on the sidewalks, among stray dogs and the boys I watched with envy from the car my dad used to drive me to and from school. Since the trip was long, especially on the way back, they were already out on the street, running around, bothering the Cortez family's dogs, and hanging out in front of the bakery. Had I fallen in love with her? I suppose I already was back then. How could I help it, seeing her wild, light brown hair from afar as she ran and sweated in the summer, or the way she put on her gloves, slowly, adjusting each finger individually,

in the winter, proud of those wool gloves that I later learned her mother had knitted for her?

When Clara Palacios died of cancer, she only went out in winter to walk around the plaza. It was then, when we had both finished high school, and while I was working in her father's business serving bread and pastries behind the counter, and when I had gotten an office job at a refrigerator company in Devoto, that I decided to confront her.

I don't know why I use such a combative word. I think I saw Laura as a prize to be won, first by making my way through the neighborhood boys, who had vanished into their own conflicts and left her alone, and then inside the bakery, so urbanely aristocratic, so full of aromas that seemed to be born every morning, die with aniseed pauses in the afternoons, and be reborn as soon as dawn broke the next day. And above all, I had to overcome the presence of Oscar Méndez, that boy who was our age, who had come from Buenos Aires with a submissive face and a stutter that always seemed feigned to me. He did all sorts of jobs in the shop, but most of the time he was a delivery boy. He got up very early, just a little after Casas, prepared his bicycle with a basket as if it were his own personal Rolls Royce, and then loaded the freshly baked loaves into the wicker basket. I, too, used to get up early to catch the train to Buenos Aires, and I'd pass him with an almost silent greeting. He'd watch me as I walked away, out of the corner of his eye, annoyed by my silence and my neat suit, with the newspaper under my arm. He was short, stocky, wearing a beret, with short, almost blond hair, and already smoking.

Not to be outdone, I took out my Jockey Club jackets and continued walking in the early winter darkness toward the station. I wondered, speculated about what Laura and Oscar did in their free time, leaning against the counter after teatime had passed. On the train, I saw the other neighborhood boys who had become traveling salesmen, I heard them talking about women, and their words excited me. I covered my trousers with open pages of *La Prensa,* feeling as if my heart were betraying me.

It was then, I repeat, one of those afternoons walking home around six-thirty, getting off the bus, that I decided to talk to Laura. I walked past the shop, placed my hand on the handle of the tall, narrow double wooden doors, as if I were entering a *pastry shop* in Lyon. And there they were, laughing, because it was their laughter I heard before I saw them leaning

on the counter, talking openly, without any shame, without hiding because there was nothing to conceal. A boy and a girl barely out of adolescence, chatting, laughing, probably about silly things. That was what I didn't understand, and it was what isolated me: my outward obscurity was a stigma. Where had I come from? For as long as I could remember, I had always been there. Every morning as a child, I went to the bakery with my father; I knew the place and all its few modifications over time. Casas would try to give me a candy he'd take from the glass bottle whenever he saw my face just peeking over the counter. My father always refused, until I learned to do it myself. But Casas never gave up.

Laura's voice had the same intonations as her father's. And I stood in the doorway for just a second, before immediately stepping back and waiting, I don't know what, on the sidewalk, like Duque, my dog, used to do when he accompanied us.

After all, I told myself, Duque was waiting for me at home. From the early morning when I left with barely a mate in my stomach, I'd leave his water and food ready for the whole day. He was already getting old, and sometimes I'd find him on the same rug where I'd left him lying down. He'd stir when I came in, forcing himself to get up with effort, he, once so muscular, always so fearless. A Doberman my father had given me as a puppy, almost red, a color my mother described as rust-colored. I wonder if she saw something different in Duque? As if she could already see the rust and the aging in my dog's soul. Because, although restless like any puppy, there was a kind of melancholy in his eyes that I felt connected to. Much later I would learn that my father had brought him from the La Tablada camp, hoping Duque would be our guard dog. He never quite was; there was always something Duque resisted. Dad, not knowing what to call that refusal, dismissed it as cowardice, as something sissy I was protecting him from. When I was older, Duque would lie down on my bed when I fell asleep and wouldn't get up until I did. Many times, with my eyes closed, I heard him grunt. Maybe it was Dad coming over, or maybe my mom, to tuck me in.

I grew up with Duque like a brother, or even more than that. He sometimes walked me to the station, followed my car to school, and roamed the neighborhood when I wasn't around. Few people liked him, and only Laura would bend down to pet him when he sat in front of the shop. The Cortez

family's dogs would bark like the furies of hell, but he, as if nothing were wrong, would submit his head to Laura's caress.
That afternoon I went home, cowering, trying to convince myself that I had humiliated myself with that failed attempt, because that was how I disguised myself. But my father's words echoed like a hail of stones in my path, as if he had witnessed that scene. He was in all my actions, before and after I did them, because he was in my head, in some shed overflowing with weapons, oil, and cigarettes, like the conscripts' dormitories, with dirty showers, walls covered in obscene graffiti, and filthy toilets. The promiscuity of men, my mother had said, was what she feared for me.
That's why they argued with my father, that's why he had brought Duque, as if the dog were going to teach me a lesson, but what he never suspected was that Duque's soul was nobler than any military indoctrination, which is perhaps one of the narrowest forms of obsession. The thinnest, the harshest and most severe, the most resistant to any incursion of common sense. Shunning philosophy, she cloistered herself within the canons of religion. Both, sisters who hate each other and cannot live without one another.
When I got home, I heard the sound of the train in the distance, on its last departure for Buenos Aires, already late. I waited for Duque's usual howl at the train's whistle, like two long songs echoing through the streets of La Plata.
Silence greeted me . Silence was an intruder in my house at that hour, a beast that had crept in while I was gone. And where was Duque to chase it away? I looked for him in the kitchen; his plates were still full. I looked for him under the dining room table and in the backyard. The last place I looked was my bedroom, because he would never go to bed before I got home. I opened the door, turned on the light. There he was, dead in bed.
I sat down and stroked his stiff back. He must have died sometime that morning. And I was working as if nothing important had happened in my house. He might have called me with a soft whimper, perhaps, but I'm sure he hadn't even allowed himself that. For several years he had lived with solitude, and when he received me, it was his own conscience he was welcoming. He spent his days keeping watch around the wardrobe that blocked the condemned door. That no one should go in or out was his motto, learned one winter night, while the train rumbled in the distance.

I lifted the body, wrapped it in the sheets it had soiled after dying, the vile, treacherous secretions of the body that betray the filth we are made of, them and us. Men and dogs.
I buried him in the yard, under the moon that night as it rose over the city. His howl would no longer be there to worship. One less bark in the world, like a voice irretrievably lost forever.

I was devastated, though it may sound sentimental and clichéd. Now, thinking about it, my words are rather unemotional, detached from the circumstances. My soul has learned that over time: to knit itself a sweater with steel wool. I can still see things from the past and smell them, but I can't touch them. Only the smoothness of Duque's hair has lingered on my fingers from when I touched him that day he died.
Can a woman fall in love with a sad, brooding man? Even a sullen, withdrawn one? I was all of that, but I was also the man who returned to the neighborhood the next afternoon, knowing he was alone in a house inhabited by ghosts and corpses living behind a bricked-up door hidden behind a wardrobe. Full of smells, of course, of filth, urine, and forgotten food on plates swarming with flies.
One woman, however, like Laura Casas, was moved by my loss.
As I got off the bus at the corner, I saw her in the distance behind the shop window. She was alone, and she saw me. Then I knew she'd found out, because I saw her unbutton a button on her blouse and lean against the counter, waiting for me. I went in, we greeted each other as always, friends of the same age and from the same neighborhood. We both knew what the other was like as a child. We'd watched each other grow up just a block away, but as if from two different worlds.
"Duke died," I told him.
She looked at me in a way I'd never seen before, because my mother had died a long time ago. It was pity, like a chain that momentarily bound her, until it shook her spirit first, and then her body. Laura Casas's body, her hands sometimes dusted with flour, sometimes with the acrid smell of yeast, other times with an old, delicate perfume that must have belonged to her mother. The scent of anise, perhaps.
I leaned against her. She wasn't crying, but her eyes were glassy. Not me, Laura. She simply took my hands, stroked them, and squeezed them.

-I remember when he used to sit right there, near the door, sniffing the air. He was a gentleman from another era, appropriate for another era.
I looked at her, amazed at the sharpness of her intuition, a crude name for something else that I didn't understand.
"Do you think he made me feel good, that he made me feel honorable?" I had often thought such a thing with those words, but I could ask no one but Laura without her laughing at me.
"Can dogs love?" he replied. "How should I know? They aren't driven by logic or the constraints of education. Despite domestication, they retain the priority of instinct, which is all or nothing for survival. They either love us or hate us; there's no middle ground. Perhaps you and Duque were kindred spirits. Two lovers oblivious to the uncertainties of sex and species."
Laura Casas, like an 18th-century philosopher, led me into the realm of ideas amidst a bakery that was dying that day, just as the afternoon was dying on the sidewalk. Then I saw Duque's shadow, for the first time, beside me. My brain constructed it, it's true. But not his bark, nor the scent of his fur, which have always been present ever since. My father's voice would be eclipsed when Duque's bark appeared in that same mental prison. My father didn't expect it, calm and accustomed to his confinement. He didn't expect dogs, and even less so Duque. But when Duque died, he could finally enter the room, without having to scratch the floor or the wooden wardrobe.
Laura and I were together from then on. She slept with me some nights of the week. She made the bed, swept, or looked after the house on Sundays when she wasn't working. But whenever I got off work, she'd come home and make me dinner. I discovered my body when I met Laura. It was strange that someone like her would love me like that, looking at me while we stood in the yard listening to the night train. We talked about our parents, but the conversation was soon interrupted by a whimper that we both heard and couldn't tell where it was coming from. The dog's grave was nearby, on what used to be the driveway for the car I'd sold.
"It seems to be stirring..." Laura said, smiling and joking.
-Perhaps, upon hearing the train, he wants to see the moon and reach it.
"How romantic," she said sarcastically . I thought the phrase would offend her femininity, her supposed delicacy, with that sinister image. Such

nonsense was how I defended myself, a mere specter of a man. She was just beginning my training.
-I didn't mean to make fun of you, Tom.
That's what she called me. Not Tomás, an ambiguous term for almost strangers, nor Tommy, trivial and trite. Like Tom Sawyer, perhaps? The association was implicit in those early school days. I wasn't the adventurous Huckleberry Finn, but the timid Tom, the one who needed the encouragement of others, and there was Becky-Laura to take my hand and lead me out into the street. Of course, I was a psychopathic Tom Sawyer, who saw ghosts of dead dogs and had a still-unexplained history of violence in my childhood.
Laura was a rollercoaster of emotions, a whirlwind of reality and fantasy, a whirlwind of heart palpitations, frustrations, and constant doubts. And just when our routines had settled into a routine, she decided to surprise me.
It was a December afternoon. It had been almost six months since Duque had died. When I returned home, I found the closet passage blocked by the piece of furniture, which had been moved. The boarded-up door was open. I saw Laura just crossing the threshold, surrounded by that unmistakable smell. And shame washed over me as if the immense moon of that night were collapsing onto the house. A dog, a puppy, was barking furiously at the bed. Then I ran out to the yard, grabbed the shovel, and began to dig desperately. I needed to occupy my furious arms, to recover the being who had defended me and was my shield, my companion, my symbiosis. My weapon and my soul.
Then I felt Laura's hands on my back, firm yet gentle, caressing me. She wrapped her arms around me, resting her head on my back. I threw the shovel to the ground and began to cry like no boy ever would.
-It's been so long, my dear, and we were so close. You never said a word, and I was always waiting.
Nothing frightened Laura anymore. Or if something did, she destroyed the fear with the seeds of nonchalance. What was irreparable for her wasn't useless; she built a small world from the rubble, even with a new dress that was tearing and broken nails.

What followed immediately was the ultimate test for both of us, but especially for Laura. My ordeal involved several days in detention, waiting

for my family—that is, the entire military clique that formed the circle from which I had tried to escape with my pusillanimous personality, according to some, and my self-imposed isolation, according to others—to do what they had to do. In this way, I evaded the courts, but I had to submit to the law of Uncle Ángel, who, as was fitting despite his name, was a guardian more like Cerberus. He had multiple heads, as many as his interests, and his hands were even more extensive. He seemed to be involved in everything and everywhere. He managed military policy from his office at the Military Circle, had afternoon tea at the Jockey Club, and stayed until nightfall arranging his business affairs. The waters of the Río de la Plata near the riverfront and around the Club were usually a swarm of boats coming from Uruguay and Brazil. Twice a week he went to the Hotel Castelar and spent the whole afternoon in the sauna, doing business, of course, but mostly politics. He said that there he relaxed and could think more clearly. And men stark naked or covered with a towel are more likely to speak the truth than men in an office dressed in suits and ties. The tie is the most atrocious invention, he used to say. Under the guise of elegance or uniformity, it's the most infallible disguise ever invented by man.

He ordered me to leave the house in La Plata; someone would take care of it, or he'd sell it. Did I have a girlfriend? He was a little surprised, wondering what kind of woman I was dating. He was even more surprised when he found out who it was. The Casas family wasn't of interest to him except as a facade of normalcy. The Palacios women and their husbands were part of his social circle. Clara, Laura's mother, was already dead. Estela was married to César Gonzaga, grandson of my uncle's old mentor. And the other one, the eldest of the three, the black sheep, as they called her, was the mother of the Espinoza family, who linked the countryside and the city with their trails of blood.

But what interested Laura was her connection to her cousin Graciela Gonzaga, from Quilmes, who had recently died. They said she was crazy, and to prove it, she had committed suicide by throwing herself under a train. Anyway, after a while, the Gonzagas rented the English-style house, and Laura arranged a very low rent, or so she told me, but I think my uncle had some influence over the agreement. In this way, Laura had achieved what she hoped for, not so much by flaunting her aristocratic status while living in that house, but by delving into her cousin's paintings, bringing in

art dealers to appraise them, and finding potential buyers. And I built myself a new life, closer to Uncle Ángel's network. That was convenient for everyone, but were we happy? Had everything been motivated by our love? What bound us together was a whole infrastructure of families and businesses, some still to be revealed. What also bound us together was a kind of selfishness in each of our souls. Neither of us needed the other to survive the shipwreck of our emotions; we had simply chosen each other like someone rediscovering a lost and longed-for possession. It would last as long as the enthusiasm lasted, perhaps.

Graciela's paintings had a certain value, if not for exceptional talent, then for the originality of their themes, in keeping with a time when symbolism, personified in dark beings and settings, suggested hidden atrocities. Although frowned upon by the ruling authorities, this art flourished in the Buenos Aires *underground scene* frequented by intermediaries and tourists. I knew many highly cultured military officers who didn't get along with the dictatorship, and also those who did for their own benefit, but without participating in political events. They were the same ones who traded in opportunities, just as arms factories and chemical laboratories do during wars, wherever they may be. Events were held at the mansion, and I was surprised by how easily Laura adapted to this peculiarly different way of life from the one she had known until then. The Gonzagas had given her contacts: museums, art dealers, and certain names from abroad. The mansion was discreetly illuminated for a few months, of course. Laura and I were two walking enigmas to the neighbors. They respected us because two legends had formed around us: the fable of the beautiful provincial girl who shone as soon as her surface was polished with culture and money, and the sinister and interesting story of the quiet man, protagonist of a macabre episode that no one fully believed.

We didn't have a dog. The puppy Laura had brought to my house ran away in the commotion that erupted last night with police and ambulances. I had Duque by my side, the dog's shadow and his barking. He came down the steps of the English-style house with me, his specter appearing on the walls of the country houses, his barking keeping time with my steps to the syncopated rhythm of the traffic.

And then one day Oscar Méndez appeared. I found him talking to Laura at the door. Under the overcast sky of gray clouds, further darkened by the trees flanking the entrance, Oscar seemed to have been born in that small, artificial jungle. I watched him approach along the sidewalk with that self-sufficient smile I had come to loathe.
"How are you, Ansaldi? I'd love to see you," he said, extending his hand.
I said hello, but my voice betrayed me.
- What's Oscar doing here?
"Dad kicked him out," Laura said.
It didn't surprise me. The errand boy had become a difficult man lately. Burly, too dark-skinned, bearded, and with sullen eyes. Nobody trusted him because he lied shamelessly, and if confronted, he didn't flinch.
-He's come to see if he can get a job. I told him to ask at the construction site next door.
They were building an apartment building on the adjacent vacant lot, and although it clashed with the residential character of the neighborhood, there was nothing that could be done. Laura had insisted that I speak with my uncle. All I got was a shrug and a shove in the back. Owning so many things, he probably didn't even remember that failed construction company.
- So you plan to stay and live in Quilmes? - I asked him.
"Don't worry, Ansaldi," he said, glancing at Laura with his usual knowing look. "I rented a small room a few blocks away. I'll be back early tomorrow. Who knows, maybe they'll have to throw me a sandwich over the fence at noon."
From the next day on, he worked in construction. I knew he saw Laura from time to time, but I didn't know these meetings took place at the house, after three in the afternoon, when the construction workers weren't supposed to finish their shift until five. One afternoon I arrived early. They were both in the living room, which no longer looked like it had when my cousin Graciela lived there, cluttered with odds and ends, furniture, and stuffed animals. Now, austerity reigned, along with muted colors and one or two of Graciela's paintings of downcast men. They were sitting facing each other, he with his elbow on the armrest, smoking a cigarette, the ash falling into the ashtray on the sofa. She was serious, her hands between her thighs, her legs crossed, as if she were shivering. I found them silent,

like two actors on a stage during a long pause. They heard my footsteps on the stairs, I told myself.
"Good afternoon, Tomás. I was just leaving..." Oscar stood up and shook my hand.
- What? You're not working today?
They exchanged a glance with Laura.
"They halted the construction, Tomás, due to irregularities in the contracts. The same old story, but this time someone blew the whistle."
When Oscar left, Laura asked me in the bedroom while we were undressing to go to bed:
- Could it have been us and our complaint?
I answered him with another question, which he also did not answer.
- Does Oscar come very often?

Days later, Uncle Angel visited us for dinner. He had called that same afternoon to let us know. Laura knew him, but she was eager to get things ready.
He arrived around nine o'clock at night, and since he'd brought a couple of large pizzas and two bottles of good beer, the roast chicken was left waiting while it slowly cooled. My uncle was trying to be condescending and chatty; I hardly recognized that side of him, because I'd almost never seen it, except for the occasional visit before my mother died. I was still very young, and the only thing I paid attention to was my puppy. The Ansaldi siblings were talking in the living room, under the light of a floor lamp between the armchairs where each of them was sitting, smoking, occasionally swearing, clearing their throats, drinking whiskey after whiskey. They were running the country, that's what my mother had told me the night she caught me spying on them from the hallway.
After dinner, he refused to let Laura lift the cardboard boxes.
-Leave it, just leave it... I was thinking... that boy, Oscar, is a very bright kid, isn't he? You guys who know him better can tell me.
Laura and I exchanged a knowing look, and the guy got the idea.
"Well, the thing is, this kid came to me with some ideas that he spread among the workers, and the foreman overheard them talking, and of course, like any good employee, he came to tell me. Smart kid, huh?"

My uncle liked those ways, the indirect innuendo, the labyrinths that concealed his true intentions. That's what he'd liked about me when he discovered what I'd hidden all those years in La Plata, even though his own brother was the victim.
-I summoned him. He explained his idea to me with complete candor. The building next door represented very little profit compared to using the mansion.
"We have to go, then," Laura said.
-Yes, it's necessary. But you could manage the business from wherever you want. You could even return to La Plata and handle everything from there. Maybe make a trip once a week or every two weeks to check on things.
- And what kind of business would it be?
The uncle became flustered.
"I'm surprised, Tomás. You really disappoint me, my dear. The house, the neighborhood, a prestigious house..."
"I understand now," I said.
Laura fell a while later.
- And the Gonzagas?
"They're already involved, of course. They have no other choice. The countryside is becoming impoverished, the rents are no longer sustainable. Graciela's parents are dead, and the old general, who's still clinging on, lives in the idiocy of a world that no longer exists. When he looks at me, he thinks I'm his son. Poor César was a weakling, a nobody, a faggot who got married to prove to the old man that he could be a man too when he wanted. But he didn't seem to like it much..."
"So who will run the business from here, then?" I asked.
Laura got up and took out the cardboard boxes with the remains of mozzarella and tomato sauce. A stray olive rolled across the tablecloth and fell to the floor. Duque's shadow slipped away, I think, to retrieve it.
- Who else is it going to be, you idiot? Oscar, of course.
It was Laura's voice, but it was my father speaking. He went to the kitchen. My uncle said a few trivial things and said goodbye.
Later, in the kitchen, he asked me:
- Do you want this?
-I am in your hands for the rest of my life.
-But not me. I don't want to live off the earnings of a pimp.

-A luxury one, which won't even look like it from the outside.
-But my cousin Tomás's house , turned into that. The bedrooms... I'm so ashamed.
She was crying, but there were no tears. Her hands rested on the kitchen counter, her shoulders raised. A dish towel was draped over her shoulder, like in the bakery kitchen. I hugged her the way she had hugged me that night, from behind. I kissed her neck and the nape of her neck. I gently bit her earlobes. I lifted the hem of her dress and pulled down her panties. There, on the kitchen counter, I showed her that it wasn't necessary to go to the bedroom to do what men and women would do in that house. We sat on the floor. A while later, she said:
"Perhaps it's for the best. How else would we live? From Dad's business? From your office job? The paintings are all sold out, too."
I looked at her and knew that Laura Casas, the baker's daughter, had disappeared. Now she resembled her mother, who, they said, had been Oscar's uncle's lover before he died.

Oscar returned many times as the owner of the house. He came and went at all hours with men who would take care of the interior modifications. We packed our things. We had decided to return to La Plata, to our daily lives, and to the anticipation of how the project was progressing. I don't know if Laura imagined anything more tortuous than a simple luxury brothel in an elegant neighborhood, where wealthy men would go, and of course, a large part of the Military Junta would spend at least one night. I knew, however, that behind the double facade of the elegant mansion and the high-class brothel, there were other realities, very often. Prostitutes die, prostitutes get infected and sick. Bodies don't last long. The only thing that persists are the remains, the garbage, the offspring who come at all hours not for sex, which, in the end, is as ephemeral as a butterfly. Sex hatches and dies, explodes, and you have to wait until the next time. Sex doesn't last long, and it has its own limit. But drugs last much longer, they last so long it's incredible to see the capacity of the human body. And when the body can't take it anymore, there are the remains to nourish the earth of resurrection. I don't know how to explain it metaphorically to make it sound less gruesome.
The remains.

The bodies of the dead.
Trade.
I mean, it happens often. You don't need a butcher shop or a slaughterhouse, or a concentration camp. A Victorian mansion with ornate ceilings is also a cage, a slaughterhouse, a cold storage facility.

Laura took her job seriously, even though she didn't have the responsibility. The lingering values of her upbringing made it impossible to imagine life without work, and once the prejudices surrounding her new job were dispelled, the rest was the same as working at the bakery. Checking the books, taking care of the house, talking to the women. She left early and returned before dark. She wasn't interested in seeing the toll the night took on the women and their customers.
It became more and more frequent. At first, she came once a week, then twice, and sometimes she'd spend the weekend in Buenos Aires. She didn't stay overnight, she said. But I was sure she saw Oscar, who was the boss, of course. "What were you doing there so long?" I asked her many times. "Organizing," she'd repeat. The thing is, repeating the question gradually built layers of separation between us. She didn't want to answer because she didn't want to reveal what was happening to her at the mansion, and I should have traveled with her, or even surprised her by arriving a day late. But it wasn't necessary.
Laura was a practical soul, like almost all the women I came to know. Those who aren't, don't usually survive. But she forged her own path through every shipwreck in her life, just like her mother. Only a natural disaster or a serious illness could kill them, but never remorse. The sense of guilt was as ephemeral to them as a butterfly or those dandelion seeds that dance in the breeze and are called *"bakers."* The symbolism is not accidental, of course, although it wouldn't have occurred to me, but to the very wind that tears away the elements of circumstance to build the edifice of destiny.
One day he sat on the bed and took off his shoes. We were living in my house, my parents' house. The bedroom, which had been closed off, was now empty.
"I'm pregnant," she said.

I was sitting with my back to her. That's how we talked lately, facing the walls in front of us. We weren't expecting any replies.
"Since when?" I asked, but I already knew that we hadn't made love for at least two months.
The next day he went to his father's house. Oscar returned to La Plata that week and they got married. They both continued working at the bakery, Oscar as a partner. I didn't ask what had happened to the business at the big house.
It was a week after the civilian incident that news broke on television that a prostitute had been killed in a brothel in Quilmes. An elegant house where naked men and a dismembered woman were found. The investigation was under the orders of judges appointed by the Military Junta.
One day I ran into Laura on the street. She was seven months pregnant, with a thin face and dark circles under her eyes.
"How are you?" he asked me.
-Well, and you? From what I can see, you're about to give birth prematurely.
He rejected my malice reluctantly.
- And Oscar, dude?
The man was now an exemplary husband, like a chameleon that blends in to go unnoticed while preparing the stage for its next catastrophe. Oscar Méndez's name circulated at the Jockey Club, and in the Castelar sauna, and everywhere my uncle made me accompany him now that I was alone again. "Better this way, kid," he'd told me, "that way I can take better care of you." He didn't care about the failure of the Quilmes brothel; there would be another opportunity when the news of the crime died under the weight of more important events.
War, for example.
Oscar's name would surface as the perpetrator of every crime, as a witness to every orgy. Whether it was true or not, today he was a soon-to-be father. His wife must have loved him, I suppose, even though he saw her walking, carrying the weight of her pregnancy like a stigma, to the house where he awaited her.
What had I done to her? I wondered. Probably nothing she hadn't wanted. That is our tragedy. What we desire condemns us.

3

I woke up dreaming about Laura. It was inevitable. No matter who I was with or where I happened to be that night or day, the body of any woman who wasn't Laura would still remind me of her. How could being a woman do that to a man? Perhaps because she was the first woman I ever loved, or maybe because she was the only one. How could I escape her memory on the sidewalks of the neighborhood, dodging or petting dogs, or carrying two or three packages of pastries her father had asked her to deliver to a neighbor? Escaping that would mean escaping the pain, and that's what I don't want. And the anguish feeds on the memory that takes shape in my dreams.

Waking up in Claudia's apartment around noon on the Saturday of the massive demonstration in Plaza de Mayo, I felt a tightness in my chest. Every morning was like an obligation I couldn't fulfill, an unfinished task. Every morning the teacher who showed me how to live was different, and this time Claudia Pereyra was already up. The sheets were on her side, wrinkled, with a half-dirty sanitary napkin in the middle, and a pair of panties on the floor. God, I thought, here we go again, because the feel of the sheet and the thought of that night excited me again. I got up, naked, and went into the bathroom. The light coming through the small window revealed the dust and grime, especially the rust on the faucets. That red color my dog boasted about so much, as if he'd been born old. That's what my mother said, and what Laura liked to remember. I closed the door because I was ready to calm down with cold water or give myself a good wank to get it over with. I tried, but then I told myself I had to save some energy for the rest of the day. Maybe I could spend the afternoon with Claudia and take her to the plaza, introduce her to the guys, even if they were on duty, but the revelry would soon begin, the party to celebrate the recovery of the islands.

I heard her voice behind the door. She said something about towels, but I didn't pay attention. I almost gave myself away and answered, "Yes, Laura." But she was far away, in her little house in La Plata. With her husband and

son. After a while of trying to live in the same neighborhood without getting into fights every time we saw each other, crossing the street to get to the other side, getting up from our bar stools, or walking to the next bus stop so we wouldn't have to wait together in silence, I moved to Buenos Aires. Once, Almagro, Chacarita, and then back to Once because the Abasto area was like a gray universe, even when the sun was shining, a neighborhood that lived at night and stripped naked at dawn as soon as the sun came up. The neighborhood was like a prostitute who worked without fully undressing, but who, when she went to bed as soon as dawn broke, took off all her clothes when there was no one left to see her. Her body, made of shadows on the bare walls, was intimate and exclusively hers. That's why the windows of the old buildings that faced Corrientes remained with their blinds closed until well into the morning.

I walked the streets from eleven until well past midnight, ruminating on my pain like in a tango, and how I liked to play the victim, thinking of thousands of ways to kill them both, even the boy, and they took me to prison and in jail I awaited my death.

Bohemian romanticism, of course, but the worn-out soles were real, and so were the powders in the local bathrooms, as real as the smell of shit and stale lipstick that lingered on my face. Women, I told myself, are dirty, and they forget what they've left behind. We men carry the burden, and that's why the obsession with method and mechanics, so that nothing falls by the wayside. And what we do fall by becomes a lifelong regret.

The shower water, in short, was lukewarm by default. I stood under the uneven rain with my arms crossed, contemplating the broken sponges, the shampoo bottles, the half-used bars of soap, the anciently aged tiles. I drew back the curtain, wiped the fogged mirror on the medicine cabinet, and looked at my face. I saw myself as old, as someone else. I opened the door and several jars of creams fell into the sink. Creams for the face, for the eyelids, night creams, day creams, morning creams, creams for the legs, for the elbows, for wrinkles. They were all the same, but there was no shaving cream, nor even a simple Gillette razor that Claudia used to shave her armpits, or whatever. Laura did it, and sometimes I helped her. Then she let me use her body. She had once told me that men usurp women's bodies, even when they give their consent, even when they desperately want it and seek it out. That doesn't make it any less of an usurpation.

Then I heard the radio. Claudia was listening to the broadcast from Plaza de Mayo. The military march, the different bands from the capital and the province . I heard the thunderous roar of the crowd cheering the president who, on the balcony of the Casa Rosada, was proclaiming this milestone in Argentine history.

I went out wearing only a towel. Claudia had her back to me, preparing something for breakfast on the counter. I stopped behind her, and suddenly the president said something about the soldiers. Claudia turned her head, and she was crying. Why was she crying? I had seen a picture of a boy, maybe five years old, on the bedside table in the bedroom. Claudia was too young; she couldn't have a child on the islands.

She cries for the boys of the war. I, simply, thought about the bodies that would return to the mainland, at least those that could be recovered. The rest would be fragments abandoned in the frozen tundra of the islands. Cold as the freezers in the factory where I continued working all those years. I was a reliable employee because I didn't have the choice to be dishonest. By what parameters can honesty be measured? By those of good, morality, sound principles, the unblemished truth? Or by the unilateral principles of some particular interest? Sometimes the interests are so numerous that they homogenize under a single facade that custom makes seem normal, acceptable, or seen so often that it's no longer noticeable, even though it's made up of multiple corpses.

My uncle had many trusted employees to whom I had to submit. The clatter of a typewriter, one among many, sounded like a regiment on horseback advancing across a battlefield, or like thunderous machine guns fueling their fury with their own euphony. And when the typing slowed, stumbling, it sometimes sounded like isolated gunshots, and the cry of an employee who had caught a finger between the keys, or a female employee who had broken a nail, was almost like hearing a parody of a gunshot wound on the battlefield. After so many years, the typed records of refrigerator entries and exits, with men's and women's names, ceased to be recipients and became senders transporting themselves. I was like a postal worker overseeing the proper dispatch of packages.

It's well known that my family practically monopolized the trade during that decade, and even before, of course, and would continue in various forms afterward. Everywhere you looked, people were dying, and many

others were surviving for a few more years. Who seeks refuge in nursing homes outside of election time, who when there aren't any elections? The elderly, the sick, the homeless, the children who are like stray dogs roaming the streets.
Those who went to war are just as many.
The essential thing is to seize the opportunity, and a war after so much time, which exacerbated patriotism, which dusted off jingoistic ideals, was the element that the mass psychology, rudimentary and already decadent for the time, could not miss.
But I couldn't tell Claudia all this.
I simply leaned against her back, feeling the towel fall off as I rubbed against her robe and began to lift her skirt.
The San Lorenzo march sounded shrill, metallic, and cacophonous, repeating itself in my ears, and I was praising it aloud, speaking of its unyielding insistence. Claudia offered little resistance at first; she let me do as I pleased, because her thoughts were of the boys suffering from the cold and their wounds, rifles like frozen stalks in their hands, and ice flowers like steel in their bellies.
I was cold, of course, on that Saturday morning in April, naked in an apartment that didn't even have a heater. But I pressed myself against his body, thinking of those spaces I had known, to usurp them again.
"We kicked the English asses, didn't we?" I said, to feel confident, to get him to let himself be carried away by my boasting.
And that day I had for the first time the association of thoughts that I knew would not leave me in peace until it killed me, because until that moment it had been hidden, lurking, but merciful enough to leave me in peace for a while.
The scent of Claudia's body, of course, reminded me of Laura, because that's what excited me about every woman I met after her. But the military march led me to the battlefield, to the Plaza de Mayo, and to the factory. The bodies, separated by the vastness of the ocean, gathered together, yearning to escape, for my mind was in chaos, a war raging against the walls of my skull. The metals sounded out of tune, and the drums pounded against my bones from within.
Claudia then turned around and pushed me away. She tried to push me away, but she couldn't.

"What's wrong with you, you fucking whore?" I said to her.
Is it absurd for me to clarify that I didn't mean what I said? Of course it is, Tomás Ansaldi. You're one of the family, my dear. What you can't defeat, you trample over, you destroy if necessary.
I carried her to the bed, my mind filled with voices, screams, and desires that had me as tense as a steel cable. I turned her face down, pressing her head against the sheet so I wouldn't hear her whimpering moans. I slipped the fingers of my other hand into her vagina and anus, and when she was open enough, I penetrated her, not forgetting to check myself in the mirror beside the bed.
The march to San Lorenzo ended, but the shouts of the people in the plaza rose and rose all the way to the closed balcony, because there were also honking horns and a huge crowd in the street. The voice of the journalist reporting on the event trembled many times, to the point where he seemed to be crying with a lump in his throat.
I finished.
I let go of his head; he said something I didn't understand. I put on my pants, zipped them up, put on my t-shirt, and threw some bills on the nightstand.
And I left as quickly as I could, because my friends were waiting for me in the square.

4

I couldn't get very far by car on Corrientes, Pueyrredón, or other less busy streets. It was Saturday at midday, and with the sociopolitical upheaval that had erupted, the streets were jammed with traffic. I parked ten or twelve blocks from the Plaza. I walked, making my way through groups with banners. Avenida de Mayo was blocked off from Nueve de Julio, as were Rivadavia and the surrounding blocks. There were leftist groups clashing with the security forces, both police and gendarmes. Tanks with water cannons were the bare minimum of what could be seen as a containment force. There would be more disturbances now that the

president's speech had ended. I could hear it in snatches in Claudia's apartment and on the car radio. Galtieri's voice was nasal and distorted by the amplification systems.

Images of Claudia lying face down in bed, stifling sobs, reached me like knocks on the windows. But they were simply the faces of women being pushed by groups of men advancing with signs, many masked, others wielding iron clubs. At first glance, there were more people dissatisfied than pleased with the president's feat. However, in the plaza in front of the Casa Rosada, the crowd cheered the Military Junta, which had come out en masse to greet the crowd from the balcony. Journalists praised the bravery of the men in the South Atlantic. Defeating the British, they said, was no small feat.

And I thought, with those trivial associations with which the psyche betrays us, of Claudia's muffled sobs against the sheets, and of the semen I had left on the fabric and inside and on her body, without cleaning it up while I dressed, still feeling the urge to gag her so that my ears would mistake her tearful moans for moans of pleasure, begging for more. But Claudia didn't move except for her ragged breathing.

I saw the blood on the sheet. She'd just had her period, I told myself, but most likely I'd hurt her, just a little, enough to confirm that without pain there is no true ecstasy, and that blood is the evidence.

Hadn't the boys in the South already demonstrated this? What greater incentive could there be for the vain sacrifice of those who remained in the cities, out of danger, than to acknowledge the extreme sacrifice of them: the sacrificed? Or the crucified, should I say?

The Church was, of course, represented on the balcony. And the Bishop of Buenos Aires was being interviewed by the official press. The blessing of the dead would multiply in the following days, perhaps weeks. Coffins would arrive at the airports of Río Gallegos or Ezeiza. The Palomar and Morón air bases would see an unusual surge of activity. The bodies that had been found, of course. Not those that would remain frozen on the surface of the islands.

April and autumn are not merely poetic hypocrisies, but ice crystals that pierce the bodies of the living and disturb the tranquility of the dead. The cold autumn, with its murky water, its dampness heralding fetid weather, its overwhelming threat of death, clouds the sky and blinds the sun's hope.

It turns the air into mist, and the mist into dew, and the dew into rain, which sows swamps where bodies sink for lack of coffins to bury them in dry earth. Nature is wise, they say, and it confirms this with its commendable economy of resources.

I elbowed my way into the Plaza, flashing my worn and grimy ID card, which still bore my surname—my safeguard against anything forbidden. There were trained dogs, very similar to Duque. When I passed them, they looked up, uneasy, and the soldiers holding their leashes watched me. But the animals were looking at me, at leg level, as if my dog were keeping me company. I found Saravia in charge of his small platoon of frightened conscripts, their helmets too large for their shaved heads, barely revealing their beardless faces. The rifles seemed heavy. When he saw me, he saluted me in the proper manner; he was young and wanted to make a name for himself in his family. Being the youngest, he had to live up to the high standards set by his older brothers. One, the middle one, was a lieutenant stationed in the islands; the eldest was a captain in a special squadron, one of those they called Death Squads. Why hadn't they sent him to the islands, as he would have liked? Because someone else was already there to carry out that task, no matter how much all the Saravia men boasted of their bravery. They were only willing to surrender a part of their family to the whims of fate. From the beginning, I told myself many times, everything had been agreed upon and planned. Was the invasion the swan song of the dictatorship (perhaps the vulture's last cry), or the spontaneous whim of a madman? I know that both the Saravias and the Ansaldis were against it, but the Junta had neglected to consult them in recent times. The families were estranged; the benefits the dictatorship had brought had generated irregular and poorly distributed profits.

One day I had a brief run-in with Emanuel Saravia about this. The family had fallen on hard times in the last ten years. The closure of the clinic they owned on Rivadavia Avenue, the murder of one of my cousins when he was just a boy. They had discovered at the clinic what would later be revealed as a common occurrence everywhere at that time, but by then nothing could be done but open the pits and ovens, close the clandestine operating rooms and the meatpacking plants forever sealed, where human remains were mixed with the cattle. I reproached him, half-jokingly and half-seriously, for staying in Buenos Aires. Was he afraid of the war? He looked

at me and said, "And you, man? Criminal and all, and they make an exception for you." "I'm thirty years old, kid," I told him. "Then you're incapacitated, man, forgive me." We didn't talk about it anymore, but right around that time he was assigned the platoon of scrawny guys they couldn't send south, because it was the same as sending them straight to the slaughterhouse.

I looked at the boys behind her as I shook her hand. It was cold and trembling slightly. Her cheeks were flushed from the cold, which the afternoon sun on the plaza couldn't warm because her helmet blocked it. Suddenly, from the loudspeakers—one of which was attached to the large, immense sphinx atop the Pyramid of May, as if that cunning woman were speaking, but the effect was comical, like a ventriloquist's puppet—military music blared as the order was given to disperse the crowd and for everyone to go home. The government expressed its gratitude for the support shown by the Argentine people. But some groups refused to leave and broke into pointless fights that resulted in gunfire and arrests.

Saravia's platoon remained on standby, awaiting orders. The boys, however, couldn't stay still. Their fingers were sweating on the rifles, their feet were moving inside their boots, and some were crying without daring to dry their faces with their sleeves.

Emanuel realized.

- Stay still, damn it! Mama's boys, sons of bitches, stand at attention if you don't want me to punish you all week.

A while later, around two or three in the afternoon, he received the order to return to the barracks. They got on the truck, Saravia spoke with another man of the same rank, this man got on, and they headed towards El Palomar. Emanuel approached me where I was waiting, smoking a joint he had stolen from Claudia.

-Come on, I have to ask you a favor.

We walked down Avenida de Mayo for a block, but everything was so chaotically broken and disorganized that we turned onto Perú Street and went all the way to Florida Street. The shops were still open there, and we went into Harrods. There was security, but they let us in. Many of the troops were already there, finishing lunch, along with their families: women and children laughing and enjoying the English cuisine. The boys were showing off the toys they'd been bought. The women were buying

dresses. The men were smoking and talking about the epic. They were in the middle of an English store, as if they had usurped it. It was all a beautiful fiction, like the World Cup had been at the time. The English, masters of the world, licking the boots of the Latin Americans.

- What do you need?

-Company, and your hands, Tomás. I can't ask a comrade or use those kids, you've seen them. You're outside, but you're also inside.

Exact way of defining what I myself had not understood after so many years.

"Marcela can't have children," she told me. "She's already had five abortions, and she's depressed. She wants to separate if she can't give me children; that's how she was raised, what can you do? A Catholic family with its contradictions. No divorce, but separation is fine. Natural children always, and if that's not possible, they try for them. But everything is kept behind closed doors. Dirty laundry is washed at home."

- And what do you plan to do, adopt?

"Not a chance. Do you know what you're bringing into your house by adopting a kid? No, Tomás. If I don't know the parents, I'm not doing it. I've been looking into it, man. There's a kid in Pompeya who lives with his grandmother, he's four or five years old. His father was killed in the first raid, a few days ago. Can you believe how unlucky that kid was? He was one of the first to enlist, what are you looking at me with that face? What am I going to tell you? They recruited him ten days ago at the factory, asked for his documents, just a scrap of paper in his wallet. They sent him to the truck with the others, from there to the shower, the uniform, the rifle, and that was it, out of sight, out of mind. They killed him the first day."

"The first heroes of the press..." I added.

- And what better thing can I do for that kid's son than give him the best education, as we Saravias are used to?

-But he's a big boy, what will his family say?

"It's already been discussed, Tomás. These days everyone knows and nobody asks questions. Customs adapt to the times."

- And what do I do?

-Help me go look for him.

-But...

He looked around at the tables that were emptying out. The sirens in the street were becoming more frequent.
-The old woman doesn't know…
I understood, of course.
- And when will that be?
-As soon as we finish having tea and biscuits.
He squeezed my hand on the table.
- And you, do you love Marcela that much?
-She's the granddaughter of old Gonzaga, do you know everything she has?
Clearly it was an act of kindness on his part, which benefited everyone, I told myself, as I asked for the bill, but the *maitre* made a gesture of disdain, and crumpled the paper.

We went in my Peugeot 504. As you can see, he was trying to cover his tracks. His Falcon was giving too much away, he said. We arrived around seven in the evening, after circling the house to kill time and keep an eye on it. It was an ordinary little house, with a brick wall, a front yard with overgrown plants, and a window set into a peeling, mossy, and damp wall. The roof tiles looked like they could collapse at any moment, and the column, with its Ionic style typical of a poor neighborhood, was the only thing that seemed secure. The cobblestone streets and wide sidewalks reminded me of my neighborhood, but here in Buenos Aires everything was muddy from the humidity and the proximity of the Riachuelo River.
Emanuel told me about the old woman's routine. On Saturday afternoons, she would go out to deliver the clothes she washed and ironed during the second half of the week. On Sundays, the boy's mother, a whore according to what they said, would sometimes come, but so infrequently that the boy barely knew her.
There were boys playing ball in a vacant lot on the corner. We sat nearby, watching the game, laughing at the boys who were swearing, fighting, and then just playing. The dogs were running around and occasionally getting kicked. I glanced back at the rear seat.
- What are you looking for?
-Nothing, don't worry. It's just that sometimes I think I hear Duque.
- To whom? Oh, your famous dog. You know people are saying you're crazy, Tomás?

-I know, what else can be said?
"That's why I like you, darling. You're a walking enigma, and that's why you're respected. Even your uncle is afraid of you."
I dismissed the comment.
-I hate him…
- So what if not? Sometimes fear hides like that…
- And you, dude? What do you think?
"Like I said, I like you because you're weird, because you're not a suck-up like everyone else. You don't kiss other guys' asses or boots unless you absolutely have to. You're straightforward, even if you don't shout it from the rooftops. Remember those brothels we pulled you out of a few years ago? I saw you, man. Sometimes I'd say to my idiot friends: 'Look at Ansaldi's nephew, low-key, that's all, but ready for anything.' Tell me, man, how do you get the girls to do that shit?"
I shrugged.
-Maybe the secret is not to ask them for them.
He laughed and hugged me; he was half-drunk, and I was afraid everything was going to go to hell. Another mess with my uncle.
Then we saw the old woman with bundles of clothes in each hand walking along the sidewalk in front of the vacant lot. The boy stayed home alone, because it was only for a little while. That's what he said, and I had no reason not to believe him. He'd kept watch , he'd asked around. The kid was watching television and chewing a piece of bread; I'd seen him through the window, in the early afternoon light, an open window, without curtains, revealing the impoverished dining room with a table, a few chairs, old furniture, and a low-wattage lamp hanging from the ceiling. The only modern thing, the only artificial thing, was the television screen illuminating the boy's face.
- And the neighbors?
"From what I understand, they don't like the old woman. She defends her daughter, of course. Like mother, like daughter, they say. So that's another favor I'm doing for her..."
"Sure, sure," I said, patting his open shirt chest.
- What's wrong, Tomasito? Are you horny?

I told him about Claudia. He stared at me. It took ten minutes to clear up any doubts. I would go get the boy; he would stay in the car and honk the horn if there was any danger.
-And tell me, wasn't it advisable to make sure he didn't call the cops?
I shrugged.
-Call me next time, I owe you one.
We checked the time on our watches simultaneously. I got out of the car. The boys from the vacant lot had already scattered. The streetlights on the block were out. A bus illuminated the house as it passed, and then only the flickering light of the television remained, illuminating the night on the sidewalk. The sky was a violet cloth sweating drops of dew onto the cobblestones. I stopped at the entrance; the small, rusty iron gate was open. I went inside. The boy didn't see me; his back was to me. And suddenly a dog barked, coming out of the bedroom. An old animal that walked with a limp, and whose bark was a cough that shook everything. Fat, with coarse, spotted fur, it had a kind of blind look.
The boy turned around and saw me.
I should have grabbed him immediately, but then I realized I knew him. Where did he come from, if I didn't know any boys his age, if family life wasn't my world at that stage of my life? From outside a school, a store, or some street corner waiting for the bus with my mom? He was one of those kids who stare at you, not scared or suspicious, just nothing, with puppy-dog eyes, as they say. Then the animal, after trying to threaten me with pathetic little hops on his old legs, stopped and sat down.
The boy continued chewing his bread, kneeling on the armchair and leaning against the backrest. He looked to my side and asked:
- What's it called?
It was the first time since his death that anyone had seen him. Not even me, who most of the time just felt his presence.
"Duke," I replied.
"It's big," he said, and got off the armchair, walked towards me and stretched out his hand offering me bread.
"Don't you want to?" he asked me.
-He doesn't eat much. Would you like to have one?
He looked at me with a wide smile, and then I realized where I'd seen him before. Not in person, but in a photo at Claudia's apartment.

- Can I have one?
- And why do you want it, if you already have one?
-But he's old, and he can't defend me from outsiders.
He looked out at the street, where the boys were coming and going, laughing every time they passed by.
-Give me your hand.
He placed it in my open palm, and I squeezed it tightly, just like my father used to when he took me to the bakery to pick up the first batch of bread in the morning. Duque was with us, and this time he did the same. But tonight we walked along the dark sidewalk toward the car. The boy walked with his head held high, looking around, searching for someone to witness the privilege he was enjoying.
A well-mannered, well-dressed man led him by the hand to give him a purebred dog, the best of its kind. From then on, he and his grandmother would be respected by the neighborhood's usual squatters.

He fell asleep in the back seat. Emanuel had prepared a candy for him with a dose of diazepam. He had already checked with his cousins or uncles, who were doctors and had been doctors. He had seen us walking to the car as if nothing was amiss, he told me later, scared and amazed at my tact. "You're a professional," he told me, as he drove toward Belgrano, where his wife and sister-in-law were waiting for him. The new clothes were already bought, the appropriate words prepared. The boy was quiet, introspective; he wouldn't make a scene or throw a tantrum. Who would he miss? He didn't know his father; his name only existed on the birth certificate. His mother came around only once in a blue moon, made up and dressed according to her whims or her guilt, and her hairstyle changed so often that she looked like a different mother each time. That's why he would freeze when he saw her coming along the sidewalk, when he and his grandmother waited for the bus that brought her. "Who was that woman?" he would ask his grandmother when his mother left after Sunday dinner.
I imagined all of that, but it was as clear as day.
Looking back, I saw the boy's grief-stricken, gaunt face, so like the photo, so similar to his father, probably. He was Claudia's son, without a doubt.
"Where can I drop you off?" Emanuel asked when we stopped at a traffic light on the corner of Avenida La Plata.

-Just leave me here, I'll walk.
- What are you going to do?
I shrugged, as I had many times that day. When he arrived, he squeezed my thigh tightly, gratefully, intimately. That was the closest I ever came to seeing his feelings, which are almost always nothing more than fallacious constructs of our psyche.
It was nine o'clock at night. I walked with my hands in my jacket pockets, contemplating the streetlights, the headlights of the cars on that Saturday night which, in the end, wasn't very different from the rest at that level of everyday life. I stopped in front of the Ramos Mejía Hospital's emergency room and thought about the day my mother died. Duque, beside me, let out a howl that didn't wake anyone despite being so close to the entrance. Only a man with a bandage on his head appeared at the window on the first floor. "I'll be right there," he said. Then Duque disappeared, accompanied by his new soul.

5

Mom had been in and out of hospitals and clinics in La Plata many times. Sometimes her arms were bruised, other times her eyes were swollen shut. Once she had a cut on her thigh, which she couldn't remember how she'd gotten. Her knees were almost always purple; she fell very easily. The doctors would ask her how she'd done it every time she went, and she'd give a reason, an excuse, some clumsiness on her part.
She's had three casts since I can remember, two on one arm and the last one on her other wrist, the right one, which she regretted the most because she used that hand for her work. She was an English teacher at a high school, and I would see her sitting at the kitchen table correcting student tests and planning her classes with difficulty and pain.
The first time I remember, she had broken her collarbone, but they didn't put it in a cast; she just came home with a sling and an injection they'd given her at the hospital. Dad had asked her what she'd told the doctors.

"That I fell," she answered. He hugged her, not realizing that his strength was hurting my old lady even more.
It was true, she had fallen, after he had pushed her. Like the other times before and after. The three of us remembered it, and so did my dog. And the walls of the house, and the wooden doors, sometimes chipped from his blows.
So many times I wondered if they loved each other, if they had ever loved each other, or if it was simply a relationship harder than love, one that created bonds so complex that neither of them could understand them. Mom had a temper, as they say, but it only surfaced with her students at school. They had seen her teach classes, and she was firm and strict with them, all boys, and they respected her. I wondered if it was her nature or if she took out on them the anger she repressed at home. She wasn't a particularly beautiful woman, just pretty, with delicate manners, short, curly brown hair, fair skin, and deep blue eyes that stood out behind her glasses. Short in stature, with a small nose and shoulders hunched from her profession. My father, on the other hand, was tall and muscular, the result of his military training and the gym he went to once a week. In the summers in Pinamar, he was one of the few who wore tight swim trunks. With his tanned skin, he would walk along the beach to go into the water, and he was the object of everyone's stares. When Mom went with him, with her skinny figure and one-piece swimsuit, sometimes even with the glasses she'd forgotten to take off, the women in bikinis would talk to them, and when they addressed her, they'd shove her around like she was a cousin or an aunt of that man's. Dad was used to it and ignored them. He'd put an arm around Mom's shoulders, and they'd go into the water. He'd signal me to go get his glasses, so I'd run with Duque and stand on the shore. They'd both laugh during those unexpected truces.
“Is that your dad?” one of them would ask, shielding her eyes with her hand as she looked at the sea. “My dad and my mom,” I would tell her, and she would walk away, confused, scared by my dog who was looking at her with malice.
I think they loved each other, of course, but what we call love is a fallacy that fades with time. What replaces it might be something more realistic, and then, perhaps, everything turns out relatively well. But what always follows is disillusionment, and there are only two possible alternatives:

compassion or anger. My mother wasn't what my father would have wanted her to be; she didn't respond as he expected, nor did she say the words that would have calmed him. She wasn't the body he expected to see when he came home, nor the attitude that would subject him to desire or thoughts of his wife. It was the years or the customs, but I think that love was doomed from the start. For two such different people to be attracted to each other for a long time, both, deep down, had to possess what the other displayed outwardly. But in my father, I never saw anything but inner fury and discontent. He channeled his frustration into anger. And my mother put on a show of strength in her classes so her students wouldn't walk all over her, like we did in my class with many other teachers, making a mess, throwing chalk at the blackboard, not letting them teach. I knew it when she came home, left her folders on the kitchen table, and burst into tears. After drying her eyes, she'd look at me from across the table. "Will you make me some mate?" she'd ask, and then she'd start grading the assignments.

The night of the drama came at the end of a particularly hot summer day. The thermometer on the kitchen wall had reached thirty-nine degrees Celsius during siesta time, and before dinner it was still at thirty-five. Mom had arrived late; she usually got back around three in the afternoon and took a half-hour nap before starting the housework . But this time she arrived close to six. She was pale and sweaty. She didn't want to waste time showering, so she started gathering the morning's sheets and putting them in the washing machine, then went out to buy things for dinner. She didn't ask for help; she was ashamed to appear weak or lazy in front of the men in her family. I was fifteen then, and I was starting to resemble my father in face and body. I didn't realize, either, that certain disdainful traits had rubbed off on me. The old man's teachings were bearing fruit.

Dad came home early. We heard the car pull up to the driveway, and Duke came running out barking and jumping. The old man stopped him with a snap of his fingers, and Duke followed, head down. His shirt was soaked with sweat. He took it off and threw it on a chair, then dried himself with a towel he went to get from the bathroom. When he came back to the kitchen, he leaned against the counter, watching my mom chop the onions.

- What's the matter?

- Can't you see the onion?

Don't answer me like that, don't you know what a shitty day I had today?
She looked at him with the knife in her hand, the blade on the board, but he perceived something that I too had seen since the afternoon.
- And you think I had fun in that shitty school, smelling the sweat of all those dirty kids?
The tapping on the board continued. Dad wasn't used to those responses, so he sat down while he continued drying his body. He looked at me, silently, gesturing toward the old woman. I shrugged. For a moment, I saw him puzzled, as if deciding what to do in the face of an enemy's new strategy.
Mom stopped what she was doing, drying her face with her apron, and took the laundry out to hang in the yard. She went back to finish the half-cooked dinner. Dad was restless, reading the newspaper, but the news didn't calm him either. He complained about the press distorting all the facts. Where it said the subversives had killed five soldiers, the truth was they had wreaked havoc on a street corner in Nueva Pompeya, and twenty had died in the bombings. He knew this because he had gone with his platoon to take down the clandestine committees in that neighborhood and in Barraca al Sur. Gloria Sanmarco's followers were worse than their leader, who, thank God, had disappeared.
"It's war," said Mom.
He slammed the diary shut.
-That's very clever of you, Estercita. And when's the food coming?
He got up and went to the bathroom; we heard him urinating strongly because he wasn't closing the door. Mom came up to me and said in a low voice:
-I don't feel well, I fainted at school today and that's why I was late.

-Tell him…
-No, why bother?
I got up and went to the bathroom. Dad was zipping up his pants and turned on the tap to wash his hands.
- What are you looking at, faggot?
"Nothing..." I said, I no longer had the energy to answer him. Even though my body seemed to resemble his, I perhaps still had my mother's soul.

We sat down again in the kitchen to wait. I was watching television. He was flipping through the pages of the newspaper over and over, drinking the wine he should have saved for dinner. Duque was waiting with Mom for some kind of food gift. The news ended and Cacho Fontana's show and his questions were about to begin. He had grown tired of waiting for dinner and shouted:

- Is it possible, man, that you can't do anything right?

It was a snub in an angry shout, more hurtful than an insult.

She dropped the platter of meat she was taking out of the oven when she heard him. All the Creole-style meat, with its oil and juices, lay on the floor, mixed with broken glass.

- You fucking idiot! You turned out to be a useless piece of shit. Do you know how much it costs me to support you all? And you're throwing food away!

Duque was taking advantage of the situation, but I had to grab him so he wouldn't hurt himself on the broken glass. Dad got up and pressed Mom against the counter, but first he slipped on the oily floor. I noticed that lingering shame at the stumble, something any weakling could have done, but for him it was a disgrace. And that added another drop of bitterness to his anger. What was wrong with him outside the house? I know his colleagues in the force didn't trust him because of his outbursts, and the superiors constantly left him out of promotions. Pascual Ansaldi was resigned to the guard duty platoons that no one else wanted to do because they were dangerous, but he always asked for them. When he returned to the barracks, he'd go into the locker room to congratulate his men from shower to shower, hugging them with a folksy charm that everyone celebrated, but also laughed at and whispered about. They said he was an indispensable member in the process of national reconstruction. That's why Uncle Ángel had assigned him to collaborate with Gonzaga on the raids by the death squads. But what did he spend all his money on, his salary and bonuses? Our house was barely middle class, and our summers in Pinamar were ordinary. Later, much later, I heard what had been said back then, and it didn't matter anymore. My dad's parties in brothels, women and men, lots of hard liquor and drugs. That's why, maybe. He'd come home fed up. I wish he'd come home late that night. Had a date been canceled? Had work in Barracas exhausted him, and he'd come back?

Mom answered him, for the last time:
Can't you see I'm tired?
-I see you, shit, but I can't understand a damn thing that comes out of your mouth.

And he slammed her head hard against the cupboard. I saw it, and I did nothing. Neither Duque nor I reacted, because we were used to not getting involved, to not provoking him, to becoming shadows. She staggered, her forehead bleeding, then he threw her to the floor and rubbed her face against the meat and the glass.
"Now you're going to eat it!" And he slammed her head against the ground again and again.
Then I let go of Duke and threw myself onto my father's back, who was still on top of her, holding her hair. When he realized what was happening, he pushed me away, and I fell backward. He got up and threw himself on top of me, holding my arms and kicking me in the groin with his knee. Duke appeared, more enraged than I'd ever seen him, and bit his face with the full width of his jaws. Dad let go of me, trying to hit the dog, but Duke had turned him onto his back and wouldn't let go of his teeth. I saw the blood and the flesh. I even saw the old man's eyes die between his teeth. It was strange to see the dog's obsession, as if he were eating his face, that supreme symbol of human expression, but also the most incorruptible disguise ever created.
When he let go, my father's face was a mess of blood, bone, and torn flesh. He covered it with his hands, but he screamed at the slightest touch, and his hands then became, for the first time, the impotent gestures of his rage. The same was true of his mouth, for his screams were guttural, and his tongue was perhaps dead forever.
I lay on the floor, not knowing what to do. Duque licked my hands and face covered in the old man's blood. I smelled him, and it was like inheriting his fury.
I got up. My mother was still, like she was dead, in a pool of blood that was seeping from her head. I wrapped her in sheets and dragged her to the car in the garage. I went back to the house. I locked the doors and windows. I said to Duque:
-Don't move.

I closed the front door, took the car out, and drove to the small neighborhood hospital. I stopped at the emergency room entrance, where a doctor was smoking. When he saw me covered in blood opening the back door, he must have thought I was a murderer, but he said to me:
-Come in, kid, call the orderlies or a nurse, I'll take care of her. Who is it?
"My old lady," I said, and I started to cry, and I couldn't walk anymore. Everything was foggy and chaotic at that moment. I was sitting in a chair in the waiting room. I asked a nurse what had happened to me when I arrived.
- What? Nothing, kid, you've been sitting here since they took her into surgery. Don't worry. Who can we call to come with you?
I looked at my watch; it was three in the morning. I saw two police officers filling out forms and wondered if they were going to question me. I tried to get into the shade, but one of them was already approaching me. He sat down next to me.
-We called your uncle. He ordered your mother's transfer to the military hospital. He'll be waiting for you there when you arrive.
- But I don't understand, how do they know?
"Alright, kid," he said, patting me on the back. "You already told us everything a while ago, don't you remember? It doesn't matter, pal. Want anything? Should I get you some coffee?"
He brought it to me and we waited.
"For now, your mother is in good hands; Dr. Blas Ibáñez is the son of a renowned figure. It's a bit unusual, but don't worry."
The doctor walked down the corridor, still wearing his cap. He squeezed my arm affectionately. He was the same doctor who had greeted me at the entrance.
-He's stable, kid. I couldn't do much more than give him first aid.
"Is he going to die?" I asked.
-He lost a lot of blood. His skull is fractured. I can't say for sure.
The policeman said:
-Doctor, I have an order from the justice of the peace in the case for the transfer to Buenos Aires.
-I do not recommend a transfer in this condition at all, at least until the vital signs stabilize.
The police officer showed the order.

"So you're an Ansaldi?" the doctor said, handing back the paper. "God protect you, kid." He turned and walked down the hall.
"I already told you it was weird," the cop muttered.

An hour later the ambulance arrived and they loaded the stretcher with Mom. They wouldn't let me see her; they took me straight to the patrol car that escorted the ambulance to the Military Hospital. It was six in the morning, and Uncle Ángel was waiting for me in the emergency room. He hugged me as they took my mom to the operating room.
We sat down in the dining room for breakfast. There was hardly anyone there at that hour. We went to the counter, and they served us coffee with milk and two croissants. They offered me more things, but I didn't want any. They didn't insist. After a while, they asked:
What happened last night? The cops told me something. Do you know where he might have run off to? It's not like him…
Had I told you that? I didn't remember, but little by little the pieces started to fall into place.
So I followed the thread that, invented or not, the uncle had laid out for me.
He didn't say anything; he was so scared when he thought he'd killed her that he ran away. Luckily, he didn't take the car.
-Yes, luckily. You did very well, kid, I'm very proud of you, my friend. I have high hopes for you.
He gently held the back of my neck and gave me a firm kiss on the forehead. We stayed like that for a long time, his arm around my shoulders, his beard, which he hadn't had a chance to shave that morning, gently scratching my face.
- What's wrong with my dad, uncle? Why is he so angry?
- Stuff, kid. You're old enough now, and it's time you knew. Have you ever had sex?
-Yes- I said.
-In a brothel, I imagine.
-Yes, a year ago. My dad took me.
- So? Was everything okay? Did you like it?
I remained silent for a while, but I knew I wouldn't have another opportunity to talk about it.

He pushed me into the room with the girl. She must have been my age or a little older, I guess. She stayed with us, and since I seemed shy, she started groping me, you know, until I got an erection. And well, the girl continued after that. I forgot about the old man for a while, and I didn't realize until after we finished that he was masturbating while watching us. We finished together, he told me.

- Damn it, with my brother! And that bothered you?

"I don't know. Maybe I wouldn't have known how to do it. He protected me, I think. And he told me that none of it was wrong, and since then I haven't been ashamed anymore. When we went out, he talked to me about people and their lies. Sometimes, you have to put on a show."

"Your father is a man who trusts nothing but strength and sex. When he met your mother, it was an oasis that didn't last long because he soon drained her dry. He sucked all the love she had for him and left her empty."

Doctors began to arrive and greeted Ansaldi. My uncle introduced me, and they all shook my hand respectfully. He asked about my mother; they said there was still no news. We continued waiting.

"Is Dad crazy?" I asked bluntly, without hesitation. I needed to know.

"Don't make me laugh," he replied, ordering another coffee for both of us. "Who isn't laughing these days? Blame your grandfather, like we did. He was just like my brother. When we were fourteen, he took us to a really cool brothel. A beautiful mansion that had been taken from some down-on-their-luck Frenchmen who went back to their country. Beautiful, distinguished, clean women who did what they did as if it were the most natural thing in the world. The food and drinks were top-notch. We got used to it; our old man would come with us, he had his favorites. But a few months later, he brought his cronies to the room. He called us both in, because I didn't tell you he'd gotten us used to threesomes, too. All that went on for years."

He looked me in the eyes.

-You know what I'm talking about, right? Maybe it's too much for just one night.

-No, man. Keep going, this is a learning night.

It ruffled the hairs on my head.

"You're a man now, my dear. As I was telling you, back then you just know, you sense what's going on. They came in to bother Pascual, you can

imagine. He let them, and then he'd take it out on the women, because he had so much energy. He'd finish three or four times that whole night, and when things started getting out of hand—hitting, bad words, things being broken—they kicked him out. I'd stopped going with them, but your father told me. My father gave your father a few kicks in the ass, and dragged him by the ear to the bedroom, undressed him even though he was already sixteen, and made him masturbate until he was exhausted. That's how he wanted to cure him, purging him of semen. Because that was my father's diatribe: male energy is the origin of the world."
I looked at him as if he were telling me a story about a movie.
-You still haven't realized it. When you think about it more, you'll understand.
There was no cure, of course. But that morning I was already working on a new treatment for my old man.

-I have to go back. I left Duque alone.
- Can nobody go past the house?
-I locked it, because of the thieves.
-Give it to me and I'll send someone.
"No, man, Duque attacks any stranger when we're not around. You know him."
-Yes, fine, your damn dog already bit me once. But let one of mine take you.
I agreed, but first I had to wait for the results of the operation. At ten in the morning, one of the surgeons appeared. He was already old, but the most respected neurosurgeon in the country at that time.
-Alberto, this is my nephew.
-It's a great pleasure, young man. Your mother is stable, in an induced coma, of course.
"Easy words for laypeople, please," said the uncle.
Cisneros apologized and it took him a while to find the right words.
"Your mother will never be the same, Tomás. Parts of her brain have died, from the blows, but also from the blood clots. Her bones are no longer usable; she'll need a prosthesis."
-Compassionate words, Alberto, please…
Dr. Cisneros glared at him.
-He's a big boy now, isn't he?

That was the way it was, and we had to wait. I didn't want to waste any time, so I asked my uncle to let me go and keep me updated on what was happening. As soon as I arranged for someone to look after Duque, I would return to the capital.
I arrived home. I told the officer who brought me to go back to Buenos Aires; I didn't need him. He was taciturn, one of those men my uncle surrounded himself with as completely trustworthy individuals. His name was Pedro, and he seemed a bit slow-witted.
-My orders are to wait for you; the colonel will kill me if he finds out I left you alone.
-Don't worry. Just go spend the afternoon on the corner of 98th, two blocks away. It's free, just tell them to put it on the Ansaldi family's account.
The Falcon started up. I went inside. Duque barely left his post to greet me. Dad was in the same spot where I'd left him, but now he was leaning against the oven, which was still on and had burned his back. His arms and legs were covered in sores. He'd probably tried to get up, but Duque had made sure of that.
I dragged him through the kitchen and down the hallway to the small room we used when someone stayed over. It was at the back of the house with only one window overlooking the backyard. It took me half an hour, with breaks, to get him there and onto the bed. He had broken bones in his arms and legs from the bites. His face was still covered in dried blood. Sometimes he protested with that guttural sound no one would hear for years. I washed his face, which beneath the scabs was nothing but tattered muscle, broken nasal bones, no eyebrows or lips. He looked like a skull. I undressed him and cleaned him up a little. He moved an arm to grab my hand. He was weak. Could he hear me? Probably.
-I'll take care of you, old man. You're in the hands of your son who loves you so much.
It would get infected, of course. Its pain, on the other hand, didn't matter to me. I couldn't scream, so I didn't care. But if I intended to carry out the ambitious plan I'd set for myself, which had sprung like a revelation from some hidden corner of my mind, where the ancient anatomists said the soul resided, I mustn't let it die. I would feed it every day, clean up its mess, too, because unlike Grandpa, I would apply the purge in a different way. That would be my life from then on.

I covered the window with bricks from the outside. Duke watched me, reminding me of his food. I gave him water and made him a big casserole as a reward.
I went back to the room. The old man had stirred a little, gasping with fever. I injected him with antibiotics I'd stolen from the hospital. The first dose of many. I left him naked in bed. His body was a tragedy, a bizarre caricature of what it had been. I locked the door. I slid the wardrobe open.
The phone rang at six in the evening. Mom had died a little while ago. My uncle would take care of everything: I'd sleep at home, and Pedro would take me in the morning to the funeral at the Ansaldi family mausoleum in Chacarita Cemetery.
Behind the boarded-up door, silence.
The dark corridor was a narrow threshold where night waged its battles against the walls. But the only way out had been abolished.

6

At least until Laura interfered, whom I loathed and cursed to the point of wanting to kill her with the shovel I grabbed to unearth the only real presence in my life. But Laura's hands, when she embraced me, rescued me again for a while. My father was taken away in an ambulance. They told me he died as soon as the daylight touched his body, covered in scars and pustules that had never healed. Ángel Ansaldi saw the body only once, before burying it in the mausoleum next to my mother. He swore me off forever. I was doomed. I wouldn't be free of his influence and his whims for the rest of my life.
I continued on my way to Abasto. Without thinking too much, my steps led me back to Claudia's apartment. Why? To tell her that her son was going to have the best life with the Saravias and the Gonzagas, but that she would never see him again? She would kill herself, probably. I would, that is, I would do it for her.
Perhaps the punishment I imposed on my father was pointless, yet necessary. But some things are useful to some, but not necessary to most.

Preventing someone's pain isn't essential, and yet how grateful the person whose pain we relieve is.
Sometimes I wonder if those who condemned, crucified, and killed Christ weren't instruments of a vast strategy of salvation through pain and remorse. We live with guilt as our burden, and suddenly our soul, weighed down by the confinement of the flesh, expands, is freed, and is it happy? Is that all? Is the body of flesh and blood a wall, a shell that separates us from the ethereal, from the ether that Aristotle called the vital substance of the universe?
I only know that some things are right, and some don't align with what should be done. The boy who now sleeps in a house in Belgrano is undoubtedly better off than he was before. It was necessary. The pain locked away in my bedroom, the decay and filth my father smelled every day, wasn't right, of course, but it was necessary. When he hugged me and cared for me in the brothel, it was his way of protecting me, it was what he needed to do to give his past meaning. Otherwise, he would have committed suicide, but he loved the ecstasies life offered him too much to deprive himself of them.
What is fatally necessary is the absence of remorse, that plague of ticks that sucks blood throughout life until it leaves us exhausted. Without this barrier, the path becomes clearer. Mistakes lose their power because pain does not prevent their redress, and losses are compensated without nostalgia. Christ is a lustful altar boy born from the sperm of the human brain.

I arrived at the door of the Sarmiento building. The night was just like the night before, and for a moment I almost convinced myself that nothing I thought I remembered had happened. The same lanterns lit at the door, the newspaper pages swirling in the lobby by the entrance, the dog curled up like a ball of wiry fur on the curb, the same chalkboard with the kiosk's specials chained to the lamppost, the same parked cars. However, what changed everything was the memory, that altar boy with bishopic ambitions who records everything in the accounts of debits and credits, who doesn't forget the slightest mark left on the skin and flesh of Christ's lambs.

The intercom wasn't working, a small sign taped up said. And they'd left the door unlocked. I realized I'd seen the same sign Friday night; it was old by now. Everything was converging, I told myself, on the night. The stars, which perhaps not even God can control, were drawing near to spy on our behavior like in a dollhouse. Soon, they would tear down the roof or the walls of that old stage set and prepare to revel in the unwritten dialogues of fate, one more of the vital contradictions that renew their empire.
The lobby light, flickering and dim. The mirror opposite the elevator, a silent and patient witness to the human beasts entering the cage that seemed to lead to heaven or hell. Was the mirror, perhaps, God's eternal tally? So many times I've wondered who looks back at me from the mirror, who that creature is, smiling from the depths, behind my image. Who hasn't seen, looking at someone else in a mirror, that something or someone is smiling behind the vain gestures of that other person contemplating their reflection, their clothes, their makeup, their posture? Always that presence that spoils every moment of joy. That's why I removed the mirror from my father's room when I locked him up. Not so much because he might hurt himself by tripping, being blind, but because of that presence of the mirror, which, having no one to observe it, would become angry and decide to invade the reality of the room.
I wouldn't make a sound or give myself away. The surprise had to be the trigger for Claudia.
However, on the landing of the second-floor staircase, I encountered an old woman, who was apparently waiting for me.
"Are you here to see the woman on the third floor?" she asked, pointing her thumb toward the ceiling. She seemed half-blind, if not completely so, and her presence on the stair landing seemed as natural as that of an ancient mythological bird tasked with collecting tolls for forbidden areas. Blind as justice, blind as death.
I nodded.
-At least she's not slow or lazy. Tell her I'll come by tomorrow to collect the months she owes.
- Are you the owner of the apartment?
Serious.
-I'm just in charge of collecting money for the doctor, who is the owner, that's all. I live in the room.

She let me in. She stayed, I don't know for how long.
I rang Claudia's doorbell. I didn't think she was asleep; it was only 10:30 or 11:00 at night, or maybe even earlier. The day, however, seemed to have ended there. The silence was fitting for the time and place of the early morning.
Two rings and a few polite knocks on the door, which echoed with a clatter of impatience in the hallway. She knew, because she had looked through it, that the peephole was cloudy and unusable.
"Who is it?" Claudia's voice sounded so different, like the only thing that clashed with the previous night.
I answered him, knowing his reaction beforehand.
- Go away!
The voice was a shriek that barely passed through the door.
-Or I'll call the police.
"If you didn't do it this morning, Claudia, you're not going to do it now. Or do you want them to take Diego away from you?"
Silence was the answer I expected, the unwelcome surprise for the unsuspecting.
- What do you have to do with Diego?
His voice, trying to calm itself, was like a car before losing control, austerity trying to deny the fear.
-I can't tell you if you don't open the door.
"You're lying to me," he said, stretching out a life preserver that was already broken from the beginning of the conversation.
That's why he opened the door, without unlocking the chain that barely left a ten-centimeter gap for half of his face.
"What do you have to do with my son, you son of a bitch?" The threat turned into anguish: "What do you know? Tell me..."
-Let's not make a scene, Claudia, the old woman from room four is on the stairs like a bird of ill omen.
I saw her turn her peeping eye towards the darkened hallway towards the stairwell.
He closed the door, unlocked it, and let me in.

We remained in that makeshift hallway, between one blank wall and another where the kitchen door opened a couple of meters beyond. On the blank wall, however, hung a mirror, barely illuminated by the light that

filtered in from the kitchen. The shadow dominated the reflected image: Claudia and I as two figures subjected to a life of mutual servitude.
But we were both, for now and on that Saturday night, separated by the void where resentment created cracks that spread and grew larger.
And there, I realized when I saw Claudia's gaze towards the floor, was Duque.
- And that dog?
She looked up at me again, this time angry, without fear.
-You're one of those, aren't you?
- Which ones?
-From the ones at the top, with dogs and cars, taking everyone away.
I didn't know if he was talking about reality or mysticism; his comment was an allegory of both the sociopolitical reality and the feeling I had had about myself for a long time: a messenger, a hitman?
-Don't worry about him, he comes and goes as he pleases.
I led her to the armchair in front of the television, which was on but muted. The screen was reflected in the balcony window, with the blinds raised and the curtains drawn. Police sirens could be heard, and the arches of Abasto were visible.
- Did you see the parade on the balcony?
She sat down slowly. Yes, he had hurt her that morning, torn her apart, probably. But that was nothing compared to tonight.
"What do you want?" she said, bursting into tears, grabbing my hand and squeezing it tightly as if she wanted to hurt me, but she was pleading. "Tell me about Diego, how do you know him?"
-You didn't tell me that the father had died in the islands.
"And why did I have to tell you? He meant nothing to me. He got me pregnant and disappeared. I raised Diego alone..."
She shrugged, condescending to herself and her argument. She looked at Duque, sitting on the floor next to the television. He was watching us, and the images of the crowd in the Plaza were repeated on the screen, over and over again.
-Diego will be fine, Claudia, you don't have to worry about him anymore.
- Are you going to take care of him?
- Us? Who?
-You usurpers.

I thought of Laura, and it was like hearing her voice after so long.
Pointing at the television, I said to him:
"The English, Claudia, are the usurpers of the islands. We recovered them."
I recited the string of stock phrases that they tried in vain for a long time to justify the actions and convince the majority, that nonexistent entity that fools boast of knowing.
- So why did you come, then?
The sirens were approaching the Once neighborhood. It wasn't even eleven o'clock at night. The number was repeated: my favorite number as a child, the lucky charm imposed for exceeding expectations. The ten in my school notebooks was a matter of chance, but eleven was always there, impossible, yet always true. My father was number eleven, the one with the body as strong as a gym Atlas, the one who took me by the hand to meet women, the one who taught me in the car what I should and shouldn't do, parked in the shade of some old building. That body that emanated warmth and protection, the fists that opened like an irremediably longed-for concession. And the caress of my hair was a gesture of power and submission, ambiguity as the norm, dichotomy as ecstasy.
I stroked Claudia's head. She leaned back against the armchair and let me touch her. What had happened during the afternoon? What could she have been thinking that made her surrender herself so submissively?
"What are you thinking about?" I whispered in her ear, my lips brushing against her skin.
-Because I still don't know, or I don't remember, what your name is.
She spoke with her eyes closed, attentive to the sirens that were approaching, very slowly, hesitantly, intermittently, disastrously unsuitable for anything other than torture.
Then I whispered my name next to his ear.
I settled on it, like vultures do.
I covered his face and mouth with my hands.
The minutes passed slowly and steadily. The sirens fell silent. The dog on the sidewalk began to bark. Duque had disappeared.
It wasn't midnight. The Saturday in April wasn't over yet.
I lifted her body and carried her to the bed. I took off her clothes and undressed with her. Her silence disappointed me, like my mother's silence.

I got dressed, and placed bills on top of the bills that were still intact on the nightstand.
I took the elevator; I didn't want to see the old woman on the stairs.
My descent was meant to be a solitary journey with no return.

THE THISTLE SOWER

1

Domínguez was my mentor, as his father had been mine. Our families, with members scattered throughout the province of Buenos Aires—in my case, the Ruiz family—and along the coast, in Misiones and Brazil—in the case of my godfather, Amílcar Domínguez—were not known for mutual solidarity. The Ruiz family was always a clan where the only bond was their local political tradition, and the tie between us that maintained a certain family loyalty was our shared interests, what was called the surname and its connotations in an era when such considerations still carried the weight of a rigidly indelible mark on history. In the case of the Domínguez family, it was a different story. Immersed in the world of the armed forces, my godfather, like his father before him, straddled the line between military intelligence and national or border politics. He held the rank of captain major, had earned a law degree, and was, at the time of the events I am about to recount, in his second term as a provincial deputy for Buenos Aires, representing the Radical Party, and in its most hardline and intransigent faction, as they said.

By the way, my name is Adalberto Ruiz. I'm a doctor, and although my home is in General Lavalle, my practice extends throughout the surrounding countryside, and I even have many patients in La Plata. That's how I had the opportunity to learn the story that prompted these notes I scribble to distract myself from my profession, from my obsession, if you will. It doesn't allow me to make mistakes, and it punishes me harshly with a remorse that nothing can burn away; on the other hand, words, written or poorly written, if not destroyed by some random hand, are erased by time as the ink fades. But isn't that what happens to the bodies of men too? Who remembers us? Civil registry books are lost in successive moves, and bones are exhumed from graves to be cremated in ossuaries. The time frame for remembering is more or less the same.

Amílcar was my godfather out of affection and fondness, nothing more, but mostly because of family tradition, which wasn't very long either. My father, Bernardo, who was practically an orphan, so to speak (my grandfather had been executed and my grandmother was an alcoholic and a prostitute back in Santa Fe), was raised from the age of ten by Alejandro Domínguez, a corporal in the Gendarmerie at that time—I'm talking about shortly before 1900. He made him study medicine and raised him like his own son, but never officially adopted him. There was a thirteen-year age difference between them, so when the corporal married later in life, Amílcar was born and raised between those two men, because his mother had died of uterine cancer a year later. My father, who was already doing his internship at the Hospital de Clínicas, had cared for her with the futile aim of saving her. That sort of cousin, brother, or whatever he was, little Amílcar, barely a year old, was asking for it.

But time passed, and my father found a woman he thought was healthy, but she too died of septicemia after the cesarean section they had to perform so I could be born alive. Puerperal fever, they called it back then. And we were left alone, just two men raising children, them in the Monserrat neighborhood of Buenos Aires, where the corporal's interests could be managed more easily, and my father and I in the province, first in La Plata, then in Lavalle where he bought the ranch where we've lived ever since. The relationship between the two families was, as I said, based on a loyalty I could never quite explain, but which was implicit in the Domínguez blood. From them came the obligation to care for us, and so, when Amílcar grew

older, he became my mentor, and the difference between them was almost the same as that between our parents. My father and my godfather took it upon themselves to teach me about medicine and the world of political law, one as uncertain and macabrely useless, the other as fallacious and insidious as a lie, but both were, in fact, a great fraud. Medicine believes it can cure and comfort, but the pain persists, and the law believes it can redress injustices, but it only prolongs them. In the Monserrat hotel where I spent my exam days and during my internship in Buenos Aires, and later when I visited Amílcar after his father had died, and at my father's ranch, sitting in the porch watching the horses the ranch hands grazed in the mornings, I thought about how to reconcile both worlds. The city and the countryside, mere representations of two philosophies that could somehow be amalgamated with health and illness, which don't exist as such, just as there is no city that doesn't hide beneath its foundations the skeletons of those who lived there a hundred or five hundred years before. And the countryside is pure idyll, where man sets foot, leaves his excrement and the dung of the horses he rides and the iron of the rifles that foreshadow locomotives and the combustion engine.

Laws and medical books are the intellectual forces that attempt to counterbalance the human beast, the instinctive reflex. But the two cannot be separated without dying at the same time.

For this reason, our single-member families, a Ruiz and a Domínguez, persisted in forcing themselves to maintain a bond that went against all the lessons of history. Amílcar taught me to abolish frustration, to persevere in the face of failure and the death of my patients. Amílcar created laws and presented them in the Chamber of Deputies with long, rambling speeches that often ended in violent outbursts and threats.

By that time, there had already been many demonstrations in Buenos Aires by the Radicals against General Justo, and yet the electoral fraud they denounced was the same practice they carried out in secret. I never understood anything about that period in the 1940s. I only focused on understanding, as a simplification of events that couldn't be classified due to their inherent inconsistency and contradictions, that there were two major ideologies. On the one hand, there was the one my godfather represented: conservative, always relying on the military as a readily available resource, staunchly Catholic, progressive when convenient, and

libertarian according to whatever ambiguous term they used. And on the other hand, the socialists, as varied and contradictory in the foundation of their ideology as in their methods, never reached an agreement, but could always be identified by their evasive attitude and abrupt silence, only to then, at any unforeseen moment, unleash terrible violence.
This last thing is what I remember about Antonio Méndez Centurión, the man with whom my godfather fought for many years from the time they met, as many as the years he had left to live.

2

I met Méndez when I had to go to La Plata to see the Casas family. Casas's wife owned an old bakery that was an unavoidable landmark when visiting the neighborhood, far from the center, with residential houses, a bar, an auto repair shop, a couple of schools, a large, poorly maintained mansion like something out of an English film, a traditional pharmacy, and a barbershop, where Antonio Méndez worked.
After checking on Clara Casas and repeating the consolatory rituals for a breast cancer that was beyond cure, I said goodbye to her husband, avoiding the rapt gaze with which he tried to hold me back, and went out into the street. I rubbed my face to clear away the bitter, rough grime that had clung to me in the sick woman's room, and I realized that the roughness was also on my beard. So I saw the barbershop sign on the next block, and crossing the street on that sunless, shadowless winter afternoon, I went in. I didn't know who he was then, of course. A man almost forty, if not a little older, with a bushy mustache like a local Trotsky, thick, dark hair, black eyes, broad shoulders, and a medium height, more on the shorter side than the taller.
"Good afternoon," he said to me, standing behind the barber's chair, closing the large pages of a newspaper that looked as if it had been read several times since morning.
"Good afternoon," I replied.
"What do you want, sir?" he asked.

-Just a shave.
She gestured for me to sit down, put the robe on me, tied it behind my neck, and stood in front of the mirror preparing the cream. I looked at the newspaper clippings pasted on the mirror, which had small rust stains scattered like moles on skin ravaged by cancer. I thought then of Clara Casas, and of what I had been told or overheard, because gossip thrives on air, and we breathe it in with the same necessity as oxygen. Clara and Antonio, perhaps, were lovers, and that cuckold Casas, who had looked at me with such anguish, surely knew it, and that was the reason for that look, not death. Be that as it may, it didn't matter to me.
The clippings were about explosions in Moscow, pro-Soviet demonstrations in Yugoslavia, the extermination of factory workers in Stalingrad, and Hitler's threat to invade and annex Poland. War was about to begin, and I, twenty-two years old, a newly graduated doctor and susceptible to all kinds of influence, the main one being my godfather's code of conduct, which, though not enforced, was so strong as to be intimidating. I had heard him speak at home about the government's position in case of war, and he advocated neutrality. And that neutrality was nothing more than a stance of not attacking the German alliance.
Méndez stood before me, momentarily obscuring all the newspaper clippings that, gathered together, were nothing more than pamphlets to combat the fascist threat. If they wanted war, they would have it; the organized people would fight. I wondered if the barber before me was an anarchist. Yes, he most likely was. But he was also a man who, in character and resolve, closely resembled my godfather.
As I was applying the paint with the brush, he asked:
-You're not from around here, are you, sir?
Some of the cream got on my lips. I wiped it off and said:
-I'm a doctor from Lavalle, and I have patients in several places.
- And who's sick around here, if I may ask, doctor...?
He placed the bottle and brush on the shelf next to the mirror. We glanced at each other for just a moment in the reflection. The man must know something, I told myself, and he was questioning me.
-Adalberto Ruiz, at your service.
“A great pleasure, Doctor,” he said, half-smiling. Then he picked up his razor and walked slowly behind the chair. He seemed to have a slight limp,

but also to be as theatrical as the whole neighborhood scene that seemed to have been set up to receive me. Because that's what I felt when he, as was proper, introduced himself in turn, but speaking behind my back and looking at me in the mirror's reflection:
-Antonio Méndez, at your service, doctor.
And he continued talking, at length, as befits any self-respecting barber, knowing his client momentarily dominated by his hands and the razor that runs like a dangerous caress over the skin of the throat.
He was the man my godfather spoke of as a nefarious adversary, a man who concealed violent maneuvers and ties to communism. Why give so much importance to a simple neighborhood barber? How could he possibly have so much influence?
While Méndez chatted about anything and everything, mixing politics with neighborhood gossip and the occasional obscene joke that allowed his mustache to twitch in a kind of sadistic grin, it occurred to me that simple neighborhood shops were sometimes a front for grand political interests that couldn't be openly displayed in committees or parliamentary meetings. The progressive newspapers were saying that the communists were invading our customs and corrupting the youth. Amílcar wasn't one to talk much about all that; he mentioned it occasionally, but gave the impression that he kept his opinions to himself and preferred to act. Antonio Méndez was known at the provincial level, but discreetly. No way had been found to verify his connections abroad or his alleged involvement in the attacks on churches in Buenos Aires. However, it was known that the barber was a man who wielded considerable influence.
Those hands were delicate, wielding the razor like a plow, cutting through every last trace of seed. They were strong hands, smelling of almost rancid cologne, yet they lulled me to sleep as one held my chin while the other slashed the razor, its sound like a scrape on leather or wood. I closed my eyes, and his voice echoed like a baritone's song in the middle of an old street, which could have been Moscow or Buenos Aires, but where the scent of the cobblestones was the same. The blood and saliva of a man lying face down, his throat cut.
I woke up to the warmth of the warm towel cleaning me of the cream residue; she rubbed my cheeks roughly as she applied cologne, and said:

- What do you think, doctor? I bet you've never been shaved like this before.
I looked at myself in the mirror, I touched my face. It was almost the same skin I'd had before my teens. I couldn't help but smile, and he, winking at me, said:
-Whenever you want, doctor, I am at your service.
I stood up, we shook hands, and I said goodbye.
Before stepping onto the sidewalk, I felt the need to provoke him, I don't know why, as if my relationship with Amílcar authorized me to challenge his opponent.
"Do you know who I am?" I asked him.
He looked at me again in the mirror, as if I were part of his eyes, even the wall he was standing against.
-He already told me, doctor.
"My godfather is Dr. Amílcar Domínguez," I said boastfully.
He started laughing.
"Please forgive me, Doctor. I didn't mean to embarrass you earlier; I have my own way of doing things, you'll understand. But who do you think recommended you to see Clara? I heard very good things about you, Doctor. They told me it's been many years since someone so deserving has graduated from the faculty."
He paused, knowing I wasn't going to answer him, too busy swallowing my embarrassment.
"Give my regards to your godfather, and I expect you here anytime. I'm not one of those guys who hangs around Congress and its dives, you know. They think I'm dangerous."
Always with his back to me, after cleaning the knife, he began to sharpen it on the leather strip, passing it over and over again with the slowness of a monk or a madman.
That was the most vivid image I have of him. The next day I traveled to Buenos Aires; I had to tell my godfather everything.

3

"So you finally met him," he said, patting me on the back, as if simply meeting his longtime enemy had made me a man. That was the day I understood it wasn't just a political rivalry, much less an exclusively ideological one.

If I had sensed irony or sarcasm in Méndez when he asked me to deliver greetings, in Amílcar I sensed true, simmering anger. The image I had wanted to form of Méndez as a bestial and violent man, heir to an old and overbearing culture, and of Amílcar as the progressive representative of a new politics rooted in the culture that came from North America, had been reversed. The barber was polite and careful in his speech, his gestures slow and methodically studied; his hands had learned the precise boundary between shaving and violence. The congressman, on the other hand, was foul-mouthed, threw things on the floor if something annoyed him, shouted, or hurled insults, but then he would restrain himself while smoking a cigarette and watching the comings and goings of cars and buses from the window of his apartment in Monserrat.

"And what's the source of your rivalry?" I asked, expecting one of the outbursts that had recently taken hold of him. The last few months had kept him busy presenting arguments to overturn the law being debated that would grant freedom of worship. Catholics had voiced their protests through every means: newspapers, radio, pamphlets, meetings in schools and churches, committees, and marches on street corners. They weren't willing, they said, to let communist atheism contaminate society. And neither, I thought, were they willing to let the investments and influence of the right-wing companies and governments that had so much going on in the country be lost. Railroad and automotive trusts, and the usual shady dealings that no one talked about, but everyone knew about. The weapons, of course, and the preparations for the coming war. If in Europe they were going to fight hand-to-hand, here they were fighting over the benefits that would become tangible very soon. That's why the proclaimed neutrality was a tiresome facade for those who weren't blinders on.

"Méndez and I have known each other since we were kids. We come from a strange family, not to say a dysfunctional one. We started playing soccer at the same neighborhood club back in La Plata. Which of us came up with the idea to improve it? I don't remember anymore, but we worked together to

get sponsors from the surrounding businesses. My dad would drive us to the most distant neighborhoods, and his presence alone made a big difference because people knew him. We expanded the facilities, adding decent locker rooms and bathrooms, at least. Later, the municipality gave us a plot of land to build a permanent field, but we had to win. That was thanks to my smooth talk and my dad's influence, of course. The mayor, an old retired army major who was almost eighty, sat sprawled out in his office with his fly always open because his zipper didn't work, telling us we were a promising team that could move the country forward, and he'd exchange a knowing glance with my dad. We gradually gave up playing soccer and became businessmen, you could say." Kids from other places started coming to play when we began winning at home. When we turned 18, Santos, the bar owner who was acting as part-time club president at the time, said he was resigning. There was a skinny guy, Aníbal, from the mechanic shop, who was terrible at playing, who put himself forward, as did Morales and one of the Benítez twins, I think it was Daniel. So Méndez and I wondered why we didn't get involved, since after all, we were the ones who had driven the club's progress. The problem was agreeing on who would give in.

Amílcar got up from the armchair. He turned off the radio where the high-pitched voice of a sports commentator was talking about the possible candidates for the club championship.

- Do you know what we were called back then? Unión Deportiva Concejales de La Plata. Very timid, but we took it seriously when we started appearing in the newspapers. And when they mentioned us on the radio, well, you can imagine.

He sat down, lit another cigarette, and offered me one. When he brought his hand with the silver lighter closer, I saw once again his clean nails and fingers marked with old scars, veiled by new skin. The hands of a man who had known hardship and street smarts, probably punches and falls. But who had long since lost his dexterity.

n't agree. The hugs and what I thought was a close friendship with Méndez crumbled when we realized we were going to win the election. Anyway, the election was a charade that the mayor and my dad had probably already orchestrated. Méndez knew that perfectly well, but I turned a blind eye to feel reassured; back then, at that age, that strategy still works. But then

the Russians appeared—or maybe they were always there—and we ignored them. They were kids, grandchildren of Polish and Russian immigrants, Hungarians too, and even Ukrainians and Croatians. They had surnames we made fun of, and although they tried to join in the game several times, we wouldn't let them. They didn't know how to move on the field; they just stood there, thinking, like they were planning their plays in their heads. But that's precisely what attracted Méndez. I started seeing him hanging around them more and more often. In the neighborhood, it was said that the Russians—as they all generally called them—had anarchist and communist parents, and that their grandparents had participated in the 1917 revolution. Méndez once told me that he was taken to the house of Krakovsky, the main propagandist of that clan that grew up in the shadow of our daily foolishness, and that he had many books in an immense library. Méndez stopped playing and immersed himself in reading those doctrines. The left had him hooked.

Amílcar wiped away the ash that had fallen on the leather armchair, simply brushing it off with the palm of his hand; it fell onto the carpet. The afternoon breeze streamed in through the window. It was probably six o'clock, and the winter sun was setting behind the building opposite. The balcony, behind the dark curtains, was a small opening at the far end of which shone the lights of the shops that would soon be closing.

I told myself, "piece of cake," and without feeling guilty, too. I already had the club presidency secured, and Méndez wasn't interested in me anymore. He hit his forehead, like someone who realizes the tremendous stupidity he had committed.

"He ran, of course, along with some others I mentioned. When the votes were tallied, he won. How? we wondered silently with my father. Reluctantly, and in front of the whole neighborhood, we had to pretend everything was fine. Méndez wasn't boastful, but confident, and that's when his duplicity began to show. 'A lie, my dear,' he told me, leaning his shoulder against mine, his back against the chair, his head tilted back, his bare feet on the coffee table in front of the armchair. He exhaled sharply and continued: 'It always reveals itself, but concealment is best. You have to probe slowly and painstakingly to find someone who says nothing. That's why leftists have a reputation for not being liars; their trick is silence, and

they lead fools into those dark pits they enter to see if there's a light switch. They grope in the dark, and they fall in. And wham! The final blow."
"So that's why? Because of the presidency of a neighborhood club?" I asked.
"That was the beginning, my dear. The Russians made our lives a living hell from then on. Not exactly at the club, but in politics. Any man who ran for mayor on our party's ticket, even with the support of powerful men in the province, would back down. Why? Because they'd either buy him off or kill him. They all carried pistols on their belts or under their suits. You didn't notice, but under his barber's smock, he's got a small Smith & Wesson for small purposes."
-I thought the knife was already dangerous…
My godfather burst out laughing and scratched his beard, which had been scratchy since he had shaved that morning.
-That method was used before, by the old folks when they came here.
He came closer to me and said:
-We have to stop it.
He was high. Both times he had gone to the bathroom to urinate, he must have injected himself with something, although he had returned neatly dressed in his suit, as always even when he was at home, and the only indication of careless domesticity was the fact that he was buttoning his trousers as he returned.
"He's going to run for mayor. It's a sure thing, and he's going to win if we don't do something. They're meddling everywhere, you know? Don't you listen to the radio, kid? Or do you only have eyes and ears for the poor guys you have as patients?"
The drug was taking effect; I'd seen it before. He talked and talked, without thinking, just feeling. He took off his tie, undid the top buttons of his shirt. He was sweating.
"I know, I know, don't say anything. Sometimes I need to vent, you know? Take off that doctor mask and put yourself in my shoes. I had everything easy: my dad, the money, the environment, the education. Méndez, from the poor neighborhood where he grew up—they even said he was a bastard—stealed my opportunities."
-But you're a congressman, Amílcar, and he's a barber.
He grabbed my clothes with his fists and said:

"Are you stupid, or deaf, or both? I told you he's the head of a gang of mobsters. What am I saying? A whole class that's eating us alive. It's not the guns, it's their intelligence that makes them like this. They're working to blow everything up. Not just anarchists, but communists, atheists. They want to take everything we've worked for. Do you want a country of proletarians? Do you want to be just a number in a file?"
I was left pondering. Capitalist bureaucracy also reduces man to that. What's better, to be a nameless cog in the machine of the state, or a wage earner searching for a job that never comes? The capitalist ideal is a fiction, just like the communist ideal. And the middle ground is frustration.
It was eight o'clock at night and he had been silent, sprawled out on the sofa, hugging me and asking me to forgive him.
"Do you want me to cook you something?" I asked her.
-Go ahead, Sonia will be here in a little while.
I knew the girl I was seeing by sight. We'd crossed paths a couple of times in the building's lobby. She worked for a foreign cosmetics company. She hardly ever wore makeup, and she barely ever said hello to me.
"I spoke very highly of you to Sonia," he told me.
- That's great! So?
"If you want to fuck her, go ahead. That's why I have her, nothing more. Or do you think I'm in love and I'm going to marry that whore and have kids with her?"
"Godfather," I said, "didn't you ever think about that?"
He looked at me. His eyes melted into a dignified transparency.
-Ask Méndez, kid, and stop bothering me, please.
The doorbell rang. I opened it and Sonia came in. As soon as she saw me, she said:
-So this is what we have, you two have fun and you leave the burden to me.
-I'm staying…
She stopped me by placing a gloved hand on my hand, typical of a pretty, innocent young lady who comes out of the office in downtown Buenos Aires to visit her boyfriend.
-Leave it, dear, I know how to take care of him when he gets like this.
She helped him up, and he leaned on her shoulders. As I put on my coat and hat, checking my appearance in the mirror before going downstairs, I spied on them for a few seconds through the reflection, through the open

bedroom door. She was taking off his shirt and trousers, and with a towel she took from the closet, she began to dry his sweat, while humming a popular song.
I closed the door, took the elevator, greeted the attendant, and faced the dark chill of the old quarter street. So ancient and rich at the same time, it was like being in a timeless place, with churches embedded in the landscape of a city that squeezed the hearts of its inhabitants until they were nothing but a dry, lifeless shell.
I would return to the new city.

4

The only way to get into the Casas' house was through the store; I never knew of any other entrance. Clara was behind the counter, as always, serving customers and chatting with a neighbor. She had a very pretty teenage daughter, blonder than Clara and with her father's complexion—fair with barely noticeable freckles. The girl had just gotten out of school; it was midday. She came in behind me, hurrying, went behind the counter after giving her mother a kiss, and disappeared down the hallway.
A boy of about the same age helped out at the business all day, in the kitchen in the morning, then making deliveries on his bicycle with a basket. That afternoon I ran into him on the sidewalk before going inside; it was a sudden collision as we both turned the corner from different sides of the street. He didn't apologize; on the contrary, he looked at me with his hands on the handlebars, angry that I had interrupted him.
"Nothing happened, don't worry," I said, hoping to summon some good manners. He just shrugged, left his bike on the sidewalk, and slipped inside the shop. I saw him talking to Clara and handing her the money for the deliveries, and then she saw me.
"Good morning, doctor," she tried to smile at me, but she was paying attention to the money she was counting while listening to the neighbor telling some pointless gossip, checking the accounts in a notebook, and

glancing at the scale with the bread and her daughter, who had just entered.
All of that was happening at the same time, but her mind was surely preoccupied with other thoughts when she saw me, because I suddenly noticed a slight blurriness in her eyes: she almost ignored her daughter, answered the neighbor grudgingly, and scolded Oscar for his clumsiness on the sidewalk. I had seen it all, of course.
-Please excuse Oscar, doctor, he's a clumsy and bad-tempered boy.
"Like my uncle," the kid replied from the end of the counter, eating a sandwich with bread and cheese, elbows propped up and a defiant look in his eyes, chewing with his mouth open.
-But he's not rude like you, go move, or I'll tell my husband.
He shrugged again, and walked down the hallway that led into the house.
"What can you do?" Clara said. "He's Méndez's nephew, and he recommended him to us to help him get his work on track. He doesn't want to study."
The neighbor shook her head in disapproval and, picking up the bag of bread, left, muttering.
"I was expecting you this afternoon, doctor. Wait a moment while I call Laura to replace me."
The girl had changed out of her school uniform into a dress with an apron and started cleaning the counter. I saw Oscar peeking through the door, as if keeping an eye on her.
Clara took off her apron, wiped her hands, which were covered with a light dusting of flour, smoothed her hair, and said:
-Whenever you like, doctor. Please come in.
I followed her down the hall after bumping into the boy rather roughly. He was a lout, rude and defiant. We reached Clara's room, where the double bed stood in the center beneath a wide window with shutters that overlooked the sidewalk on the busiest street. There were wedding photos on the nightstands and the dresser. The house smelled old, but nothing seemed out of place: the rugs on either side of the bed were neatly arranged, the paintings were typical of any family home, some impersonal, others in bad taste. The floorboards were wooden, and they creaked with every step, even that of the dog I hadn't seen before, lying in a corner.
-The poor thing is blind, that's why he doesn't move much.

I saw him huddled in a corner, his head raised. I was struck by the fact that he had no ears, but he raised his head attentively when he heard the footsteps even before we entered.
- How have you been these past few days, Clara? How are you finding the medication?
She sat on the bed, I sat in a chair.
-I don't know what to tell her... How stupid of me, I didn't offer her anything to drink!
-Don't worry.
Suddenly, she seemed to collapse. Her arms fell onto her skirt, her shoulders slumped, and her back hunched.
"The truth is, doctor, they make me feel down. You see me at work, I'm a whirlwind, but when I sit down, I'm a wreck. I don't know what I'm going to do about them..." She glanced toward the bedroom door. "They don't know what to say to me or how to behave, and I can't pretend all the time. Laura's at a very young age, you know what I mean, and on top of that, she's already attracted to that boy."
- And your husband?
"That's another one who doesn't know anything about these things, or rather, he does know and that's why he doesn't say anything. What's the point? And he's right."
"But he'll give her a hug from time to time," I said, intruding on the private life of this woman who was nothing more than a patient to me.
She smiled.
-Yes, I know. But it's not very demonstrative.
I wondered if what they said about her and the barber was true. Perhaps comfort lay outside the home.
I examined her in the silence, where the sounds of air in her lungs were like the wind passing through the hallway of the house. La Plata, a city of diagonals like a labyrinth of passageways, drew in the winds of the pampas. I wrote two prescriptions for new tests and X-rays, partly to justify my visit, because Clara, in my opinion, was already beyond hope. The cancer had taken hold in both breasts and was spreading through her bronchi, without a cough or any other symptom than those internal rumblings of obstructed and sluggish air, the sounds of a body complaining as if we were inhabited by thousands of demanding and capricious creatures.

Like Oscar Méndez, the boy who watched us from the doorway in the dark, windowless hallway, isolated from the afternoon sun that was beginning in the city.

I stepped out onto the sidewalk in the middle of siesta time. There was nothing but the hum of traffic on the avenue. The cathedral loomed in the distance, making its way through the neighborhood's side streets. I walked without thinking, knowing I was heading to the barbershop, but I needed to kill time to convince myself of the reasons why I wasn't just taking the car and going back to Buenos Aires right away. That's where my main clientele was, my apartment in the Agronomía neighborhood, near the university and the hospital, and I realized an undeniable truth that I had tried to suppress by piling layers of concrete over it, layers that built the mask that resembled Amílcar. I tried to be like him because I thought what he had instilled in me was right, sensible, intelligent, logical. What makes a man. And what is man?, I wondered, walking along the paths of the vacant lots full of weeds and thistles, looking at the dogs searching for remains, perhaps, of dead rats.

I wasn't my godfather; I was different, but different in what way? To identify white, I must know black. If I didn't truly know what he was like, I could never know what I was like. Was this a healthy method? No, of course not. It was dependent, it was evasive, it was going around in circles a thousand times in a labyrinth that probably had a sealed exit.

However, I was the only one. That's why I walked the streets killing time, reading the campaign posters for the upcoming municipal elections. Amílcar was right, Méndez was running, and everywhere there were posters plastered on walls, flyers tacked to lampposts, and a pickup truck driving around with a megaphone blaring an unbearably loud party anthem that praised the virtues of the working class and extolled the personality of the candidate, a citizen like everyone else, he said, a man of the neighborhood.

It was four in the afternoon. I arrived at the barbershop door. Méndez was sitting in an armchair, leafing through the afternoon edition of *La Prensa* . Next to the frame was a poster announcing a lecture by Orestes Giraldo at the club's headquarters. "Who was that?" I wondered aloud, and Méndez answered me.

- Interested, Doctor? Why don't you join me? I've been invited to make a toast in honor of our guest.
More campaigning, of course, and this time by a leader of the Communist Party. Why not, I thought to myself.
-We'll see, Méndez.
- What do you think of the lady?
-Excuse me, Méndez, but I will only discuss that with your family members.
-I understand, doctor, but as I already told you, I have a very close relationship with the lady, with her and her whole family, of course.
-Next time I'll ask Clara for permission.
Méndez laughed. He had the newspaper folded under his arm and threw it a short distance away onto the armchair.
-You're really strict, who did you learn that from ? From Congressman Domínguez, for sure, because from your godfather, that seems unlikely.
Faced with that direct attack, I didn't let him intimidate me. If I had spent the afternoon looking for excuses to find out more, I wasn't going to play the victim and back down just like that.
-The godfather already told me a lot about you, about your time at the club and all that. It seems to me that old grudges have hardened.
"You've put it very well, doctor. Men's bodies harden with age, but not because the skeleton becomes stronger; rather, the bones are propped up by resentments, like great stone columns. Sometimes, it's the only thing that holds us up."
"Political phrases," I thought, "but they weren't all bad compared to the platitudes we'd been hearing lately."
He started looking at me sideways, and walked around me.
"Doctor, you know, I wouldn't have minded selling you a haircut. I don't know who's doing your hair, but in my opinion, it leaves much to be desired..."
I went inside and looked at myself in the mirror. It was true, I had long hair and I barely combed it when I left home early. The city wind had helped to change the image of the neat doctor with his leather briefcase into something resembling a mad scientist.
With a smile brought on by my own reflection, the tension between us dissipated as the clean, pleasant sound of the scissors alternated with the scent of cologne. The result was commendable. I looked in the mirror and

liked how I looked, so different from how I had imagined it would turn out. He didn't shave me, because the velvety veil of my beard accentuated the haircut in a masculine and formal way.
"You're a young man, doctor, if you'll allow me to address you as such. Think of the patients you could win over, after curing their physical ailments, of course; otherwise, it's unethical."
It wasn't sarcasm this time, but complicity.
- And you, Méndez? Aren't you married?
He clicked his tongue in contempt.
"Nonsense, Doctor! Women are too much for us. What's the point of spending our lives trying to understand them? They're not so bad at certain times, of course, we're men after all. Haven't you noticed that we don't matter much to them? The submission they offer seems to be a result of our male dominance and what binds us to them. We think we're like caveman men dragging them by the hair, but it's they who grab us here," he said, placing a hand on his crotch. "Their dominance is invisible, but they bind us with their voices, intoxicating our souls, and with the guilt that chains our will."
She shook out her apron, threw it into a basket, and said:
-Damn, it's time to leave. We have to get there early to organize the schedule of speeches and toasts, and all that nonsense, but it's necessary, doctor.
-I certainly think it's necessary, Méndez. What would the club be without you!
As he took off his barber's apron and tied his tie, he glanced at me knowingly in the mirror. He winked, and I knew then that I had won him over to my party, a party whose nature and objectives I didn't even know. A small party, a triangle or a trinity where the balance came from opposing forces at war.

5

The "Concejales" Social Club was on a corner five blocks behind the English-style house that had collapsed and been abandoned. We went in my car; I didn't intend to stay long at the meeting, as I would be back in Buenos Aires by ten at the latest.

It was a whitewashed shed, painted several times over the years, as evidenced by the peeling paint on the exterior walls and the corrugated iron roof. Many men were gathered in groups outside, smoking and chatting. It was almost eight o'clock at night, and an incredible light, unimaginable for what I thought that place was capable of, emanated from within. We passed between the groups of men, who made way for us when they saw Méndez, looking at me curiously, whispering, and nudging each other questioningly.

Méndez had his arm by my side, protecting me, perhaps? There was a large seating area with mismatched chairs of all kinds, many brought by the attendees themselves from their homes. In front, a desk with glasses and papers, and four chairs. The bright light came from fluorescent tubes, still new at that time, and expensive, no doubt.

Inside, the air was thick with cigarette smoke, which drifted in through the open windows. The few women present wore coats and shivered; the wives, who did nothing more than accompany their husbands and listen to their conversations, but the others—those who came and went with trays of empanadas and glasses of wine for the men, and some liquor or simply water for the ladies, or those who carried papers, pens, and glasses, moving from group to group, consulting, asking questions, smiling—didn't have time to think about the cold, because they surely didn't feel it. The noise was like the bubbling of water beginning to boil inside that human oven that was the social club, where the fire came from the political passions that gradually heated up as the men arrived and the ideas took shape in the air. The smoke helped one think, sometimes, but other times it only solidified the rhetorical figures of ideologies, most of them outdated, but which insist on not disappearing, like ghosts do.

A tall, thin man over sixty years old, with sparse hair, wearing a gray suit that seemed too big for him, opened his arms from afar when he saw us arrive.

-My dear Antonio, we finally meet after so long.

They hugged and patted each other warmly. The others applauded the reunion.
"My dear old Orestes... You know, Doctor?" Méndez said, taking my arm again. "This man was my close friend when I was a kid, he looked after me in bad times, he saved my family from poverty..."
"Come on, come on, all I did was give you a job at the factory. Do you know, young man, how hard this guy worked? All day at the factory, at night the barbering course, and then to the committee to write speeches, because most of our people couldn't speak a word of Spanish, or they were illiterate, and I say that with pride, because to read the nonsense that the government publishes under the pretext of morality and progress, it's better to remain ignorant."
Then he looked at me, frowning.
- And who is this young man, Antonio? A new comrade?
Méndez laughed, which he couldn't help but continue doing as he said:
-It would be a miracle if it were, and I might even become Catholic.
Everyone celebrated the idea, but the old man was left waiting.
-It is Dr. Adalberto Ruiz, godson of Congressman Domínguez.
Orestes Giraldo was an authority figure; that's when I realized it. Those around us, like spectators of a legendary reunion and soon to witnesses of the support he would offer the campaign, murmured, but the most scandalous thing was the silence. Orestes, director of the Communist Party, respected for his intelligence and discretion, but opposed by the most orthodox, broke the ice with irony.
-If he comes as a spy, doctor, he'll see that we're not hiding anything.
“He’s an open-minded young man, Orestes,” Méndez said, whispering something in his ear, probably about Clara. The old man nodded and seemed to calm his worry about what he thought was his excessive talk in front of a stranger; it wasn’t his custom, nor was it customary to give those committee talks that were nothing more than endorsements of comrades elected by a large majority. It seemed to me, when he later began to speak to the audience in a silence broken only by coughs and the running of a few boys, that the favor he was doing with his presence stemmed more from nostalgia for the past than from supporting Méndez for the mayoralty. It was the convenient thing to do, perhaps, it was the necessary thing, he seemed to be saying. The difference of almost twenty years authorized or

obliged him to choose a successor, a choice that circumstances didn’t always allow.
My godfather was right; the barber was climbing the ladder, and he had chosen the opportune age, that of maturity and supposed serenity where experience settles and passions subside, where impetuosity gives way to thought. Popular excesses, whether from the left or the right, were leading the political sphere down violent and chaotic paths. Let us learn, Orestes Giraldo said, to discern between the ruling class and the class oligarchy. Intelligent people are born, not raised. Militancy is an instrument for the benefit of lofty ideals, not for self-interest. God is an opiate that cowers the people; he is an invention of the idle class, who hide the eyes of the blind behind the spectacles of intellectuals.
I will not transcribe the speech, and if I do so indirectly, it is with the limitations of my impartial interpretation. But Méndez was satisfied, because like everyone else that night, he knew he could expect nothing more from Orestes Giraldo than party idealism, ideas elevated above the ingrained practicality of the motives imposed on daily life. In the world, at best, the lesser evil prevails, which is almost always a bloody and unacceptable amputation to save a life that would have been better off ending. If God is an invention, the cathedral-like philosophical constructions that become political structures reveal no greater reality than that other great entity. What the human mind builds is usually destroyed by the hands, which are nothing more than instruments that demonstrate the wear and tear of that perishable material of ideas.
So, sitting in the front row with those strangers, listening to the words like the tolling of bells calling to an atheist mass, I wondered, what endures? Not the flesh, I've seen and confirmed it. Not even the bones are spared. When we throw our hands up in despair, as Clara did that afternoon, in a show of helplessness and hopelessness, perhaps we should thank those same hands that are our enemies for the mercy they show us by not crushing us immediately, by not tearing apart the graveyard we call brains.

The neighboring couples left before midnight; only the club members, party members, and their acquaintances remained. Dinner was prepared. We helped set the tables, lay out the tablecloths, plates, and glasses, and opened more bottles. From the kitchen, we could hear the Neapolitan cook

and his assistant arguing in dialect; the aroma of the sauce and meat wafted through the air and filled us with delight. Orestes sat at the head of the table, Méndez to his right.
A shout was heard from the Italian:
- Let's eat, gentlemen!
Everything was very informal, as befitted a gathering of comrades and men who didn't need to worry about prying eyes or what might be said afterward. We all took turns going to the kitchen with our plates and returning with our portions of ravioli and stew. The menu had been decided by the Italian section of the committee, of course, and the drinks, besides the wine, were brought by the Russians. This Krakovsky fellow, whom my godfather had told me about, brought vodka and other spirits that left many of us completely wasted all night. The pampas weren't the steppes, but the attendees refused to acknowledge that.
We talked about politics, and the speeches recently heard in Congress were torn to shreds . Krakovsky, who was a senator, said that Farías would never become president, even if he tried to sway the elderly and the unfortunate by publishing very emotional photos with the sick son whom everyone knew he kept locked up at home like a monster.
"Don't talk about disabled people like that," Giraldo told him. According to gossip, he too had a son who was in and out of a psychiatric hospital.
"But doctor, did you see that kid? To say he's a monster is an understatement. But the real son of a bitch is his father. He pretends to be a good guy, but his soul is even more twisted than the boy's."
Then they talked about women, and the conversation dispersed into groups. Some fell asleep, others continued eating, and most kept drinking. Méndez was one of them, and he was already drunk by two in the morning. The gathering was winding down, because the younger ones knew they shouldn't get carried away with excesses unbecoming of a visitor. In shirtsleeves and without ties, hats on the floor, some belts loosened to aid digestion. The smells of various tobaccos mingled, belches contributed to polluting the air, and flatulence became the laughingstock of the more uninhibited.
Giraldo got up from his chair, put on his jacket and overcoat. Méndez, who had made three toasts instead of one, made another, but he didn't know what he was saying. Orestes put his arm around his shoulders and said:

-Behave yourself, dear.
He left alone, without expecting anyone to accompany him. I, being the only one more or less sober, ran to the door, as if it were my duty not to leave that old man alone.
"Doctor," I said, watching the shadow disappear down the path. "Would you like a ride somewhere?"
"You're a sensible fellow, sir. Don't get the wrong impression of us leftists. There are idiots and rude people in every party, morons, psst!, I won't even go there. Look after Antonio tonight, make sure he doesn't get into trouble, when he's drunk... well... I won't say anything because I hope it doesn't happen, but you'll find out if he's unlucky."
I stayed smoking on the sidewalk until I felt Méndez's rough hand on my right shoulder.
"Shall we go to the brothel, Doctor? What do you think? Don't say no... I'll go alone then, dear." He kissed me on the cheek and prepared to leave. My godfather would hold my hand when he was sober, and he hated it when I touched him when he was high.
I followed the man who had started walking alone along the sidewalk, heading south, towards the street corner that led to I don't know where.

I hadn't yet met the woman who would become my wife, so I had no qualms about sleeping with women who quite adequately, and often more than that, satisfied my body's demands, which became increasingly complex as I grew and matured. It amazed me that the more sex one has, the more one demands of it, to a certain point where the body betrays us with some illness or the mind wanders off toward other interests. The psyche is not dominated by the body but by feelings. As long as there is no love, or even affection, the ecstasies of the body become confused with those of the spirit.
The women at the brothel on the corner of that same street as the club and a diagonal street whose name I can't recall were clean, but the place looked like an ordinary boarding house. The girls weren't so young, they were over thirty, and they seemed like bored housewives, dressed in petticoats or dresses that showed no provocation. The heaters satisfied their need for warmth so they didn't have to wear coats to hide their bodies. There were two men in the waiting room, smoking. They greeted

us, especially Méndez. I was holding his arm so he wouldn't fall. He spoke little, aware of his condition; he didn't seem to want to make a fool of himself with me, because I don't think he cared about the others, just like at the meeting. Only with me did he try to appear to control himself or at least maintain some semblance of control over his actions and his body. But, as I said, the body betrays.

That's what happened when he went into a room with one of the women. For a while, I waited in the living room. Several women looked at me from the chairs and the sofa, only three or four. Finally, one convinced me. I was aroused by the sight of them, by the scent of the heat and the smell that lingers in those indefinable places. The smell of their lips and hair, and also of the traces of secretions they have on their skin that they can't wash away. The mucus that intensifies the lust and satisfies more than clean, tidy sex, hygienic sex. Is it wrong for me to say this, a doctor as I am? If it's wrong, then so is being a man.

There we were, on the mattress, naked and naked, when the door opened and the woman Méndez had chosen entered listlessly, her breasts exposed and her panties threadbare, and said:

-Hey, the friend who came with you is lying on the floor, completely wasted. I hope he's not dead…

She threw the cigarette on the floor. I jumped up and pushed her as I left. She cursed at me, but followed me into the room. Méndez was lying face down on the floor, his ass in the air, but he was breathing and had a pulse, though very weak. I told the women to help me lift him; one reluctantly agreed. The other men had run away.

We put him in bed.

"I'm going to get the briefcase in the car," I said.

The mine stopped me.

-Yes, you back out and leave us with the load.

-I'm telling you I'm a doctor, come with me if you don't believe me.

He looked at one of the others, the one I had gone into the room with, and sent her away.

We got dressed and went out into the cold street. The car was parked next to the curb across the street. With her arms crossed and shivering, wearing an old coat but no stockings and sandals, she watched me open the trunk and take out my briefcase.

"So it's true, kid," he said to me. "Are you from around here? Yeah, you come around, I'm here every day..."
I ignored him; I was worried that all that mess would end in tragedy. Méndez was still naked and now breathing heavily. I listened to his chest and took his blood pressure. It was low, but he was recovering. The alcohol and the high blood pressure had probably combined to bring him down.
"What happened?" I asked, when he was feeling better and I had covered him with a blanket.
The woman who had been with him told me:
-It's the same old story, when he drinks too much he can't get it up. But he keeps at it, so I have no choice but to grope him until he can't take it anymore. When he's done, he's like a baby who sleeps through the night, but if I don't, this happens.
-So it's not the first time.
"No, kid, but he'll be one of the last. I wouldn't let him in if it weren't for the fact that he pays a lot and very well, and because of the trouble he'd cause afterward. He threatened to shut us down."
"Leave us alone," I told him.
She and the others, who had been watching from the doorway, left and closed it. I stayed watching him until he woke up on his own at 5:30 in the morning. It wasn't dawn yet, but the streetlights had already gone out.
He looked at me, turning his head. I was lying down too; I had tried to get some sleep.
- What are you doing, doctor?
- How are you, Méndez?
-So you're taking care of me like...
-Last night wasn't good...
"And what's it to you? You're afraid of the scandal, and that it will tarnish your beloved godfather's reputation. Do you really think he's so spotless? Those polite manners, those wealthy clothes, the season tickets at the Colón..."
"Be quiet for a bit," I said, grabbing his wrist to take his pulse.
He threw off the blanket, sat up in bed, rubbed his genitals, and said:
-Damn it, I didn't finish this time either, I get too excited and suddenly I faint, I don't know.

-And they told me it's not the first time, you should get checked out, Méndez.
-I have other concerns.
He went to the bathroom to urinate.
-You're not old, Méndez, it's just a matter of taking some medication to control your blood pressure.
He came back just like that, without covering himself, touching his penis as if he wanted to mistreat it for being disobedient.
-You take care of Clara, doctor, and leave me alone, I know what I'm doing.
He sat on the bed.
-Let's see if these bitches can give us a smackdown.
-It's not six o'clock yet, they must be sleeping.
He looked at me with spite and contempt.
"Oh, look at the gentleman who thinks of the rest of these innocent maidens! You are like your godfather, my dear, you pretend to be prim and proper, but you plot schemes in secret, and then you complain if it goes wrong."
“Or if a friend betrays us,” I said, turning on the pale overhead light. The shutters were welded shut. I saw for the first time, in the ochre glow of that light, Méndez’s skin, covered in thick brown hair, his firm body, his hard chest, his head like the profile of a Roman magistrate, with a well-groomed beard and clear eyes of an unusual, almost jungle-like green. Yes, something like the color of a painting where the different shades of the trees in a coastal rainforest blend together. And his skin was covered in scars.
- What verse did Amílcar write for you? - He no longer addressed me formally; now he was fully himself, his thoughts as naked as his body.
-About the club elections and all that, but leave it, you already told me it's none of my business.
"You keep pretending to be prudish when you're dying to know everything. You're a dirty old fellow, my dear, just like all of them. Amílcar's problem is the problem of his class; they think they deserve everything and that everyone else has an obligation to get it for them, whether it's governments or women."
-So it was over a skirt thing, wasn't it? I imagine it was because of Casas' wife.

Méndez got out of bed and started looking for his clothes on the floor. That gesture of getting dressed before speaking about Clara was more than a sign of respect. He put on his trousers and white shirt, stained with dinner and smelling of sweat.

"If you had seen her fifteen or twenty years ago, she was a beauty. More than her body, it was her elegant way of walking, her natural grace. Her laughter was genuine. She had the perfect height, the ideal figure that made any dress—and she didn't own many—look good on her. If she wore makeup, it was never too noticeable, and if she didn't, her face still glowed. She suffered, too; she cried and screamed. When she got angry, we feared her like a god who is worshipped, a god who crumbles and reveals his flaws, and that's why we loved her even more. That was in her adolescence, when the three sisters had no one but their mother, who couldn't support them because the government had cut off her pension due to her husband. Palacios was a Yrigoyen supporter who worked at the Ministry of the Interior as a simple clerk during Justo's government." When he died of a heart attack in his forties, the government remembered all the articles he'd sent to the newspapers, and all the obstacles he'd put in the way of the cases he handled. They never fired him because he knew too much, and they didn't kill him, or who knows if his sudden death wasn't due to something other than that heart attack recorded on the death certificate signed by the court doctor on duty. He died in his office, they said, at ten o'clock at night, because he worked late at his typewriter, going back and forth from the metal filing cabinet to his desk, and the creaking of the open drawers made music with the clatter of the typewriter.

Antonio Méndez opened the door and knocked. The morning silence inside the house answered him.

The sisters looked for boyfriends with some money, but they did what they could. The eldest married a countryman and went to Entre Ríos; the youngest was the luckiest, she snagged Gonzaga, who later became a general, and that's another story. And Clara, the middle one, and the most beautiful of them all, wasn't content with what she saw. She took care of her mother; by the time she was twenty-four, she had many suitors surrounding her, but she knew they were all after sex and nothing more. Nevertheless, she didn't rule any of them out. She was very intelligent, studying to be a teacher, but she didn't know how to do anything other

than housework. She had to dedicate time to her studies, and it wasn't enough after working and taking care of her mother. Casas—that was a key name, one that has been repeated for a long time. Casas, as if his surname were a sign of fate that destined him and those around him to a certain place and condition. She worked at the bakery as a kitchen helper when Rodrigo was young and single, a somewhat reserved but approachable guy in the neighborhood, an ordinary fellow who went unnoticed, much like his last name. Casas, like someone naming their house, something so common and so intimate that we didn't think about him every day, only when something happened, as I said, written by fate. Casas's life seems predetermined, and don't laugh, because he's got a bit of a *jinx* . Women understand that, but we men struggle with it. We rack our brains trying to make things the way we think they should be. Women settle down, create chaos at their expense, condemn, and the next day seem to forget. We writhe in impotence, going over things in our minds, thinking for years if necessary, but we act as if nothing matters, as if everything is just the way it is. Silence, kid, hides a lot of noise.
The sound of the bathroom draining was heard.
"They're awake," he said. "I'm going to tell them to make us some bitter mate. I suppose you're not one of those who likes it sweet."
I heard laughter from the kitchen. He came back and sat down. He put a hand on my knee, squeezed it tightly, and said:
-Thank you for your help, doctor.
"Well," I said , "don't get all sentimental with me. Keep telling us. Who were the suitors?"
"There were many, but the three of us she considered the best. Amílcar was one, who boasted about his family connections and thought he had it made. Casas, whom we resented because we didn't know what went on at the bakery when she went to work—we suspected he'd slept with her, but we wanted to believe Clara had resisted him—and besides, he was a man who avoided gossip, down-to-earth when necessary, serious almost always. And me, of course, the poor kid from the neighborhood with a bad reputation, foul-mouthed, who used to fight with the Russians with rocks and kitchen knives, until I became friends with them, and then, I was a communist, a Marxist-Leninist in every sense of the word, but mostly in my fists, because the other kids, encouraged by government propaganda,

would jump on me. And your godfather, you know, he defended me. And then we'd shower and go play ball." That's why he got confused, I suppose, thinking I owed him favors. He's not the type to demand repayment, but rather the type to take it for granted. They're the worst, because they think everyone thinks like them, and they get offended if others act differently. That's what happened in the club elections. He thought I conspired to defeat him. That wasn't the case, but it wasn't exactly clean either. I would have liked to tell him to ask his old man if he wasn't involved too. We all knew those neighborhood club elections are the same small-scale mess as what happens in the municipalities, the province, and the country. Pure fraud, some better, some worse. I never hid my allegiance to the socialists, not from anyone, least of all Amílcar, who was my best friend. He thought I would rig things so he would win, and since that didn't happen, he's had it in for me ever since. I fought for what was mine, my friend, because I didn't owe him or anyone else anything.

"The mate!" they shouted from the kitchen.

"I'll go," I told him.

In the kitchen, two women were drinking mate and eating biscuits.

"Would you like one, doctor?" asked the same woman as last night.

"For the old man," I said.

- And how is he/she?

-Better yet, we'll leave in a little while.

-There's no rush, nothing's happening here until tonight. And tell me, what's that guy to you?

-Nothing, just a friend of my godfather, that's all.

-Uh-huh…

The other one, the one who had been with Méndez, said:

-Shut up a little, ask less God and…, they come here to fuck and nothing more, and if I've seen you I don't remember.

The other one laughed.

- Did you see? It's a dictionary of proverbs.

When I returned to the room, Méndez winked at me.

-Lots of talking with the girls. How was your night?

" *Coitus interruptus* …" I told him. "Right in the middle of it, they came to warn me about your thing."

Serious.

-It's part of the job, doctor, it won't be the first or the last time.
He drank two mates and ate two moist biscuits.
-It's almost seven o'clock, kid. Shall we go?
-He's not going to get away with it that easily, Méndez. Keep telling us, you owe me.
I told him that on purpose, of course, but he knew it was true. He owed me a home visit, no less.
"About Clara, your godfather is right. He didn't say anything to you, I suppose, but he's using his resentment over the club elections as an excuse to hide his biggest defeat. Most men aren't so bothered by losing a position, a post, or any competition as they are by feeling vulnerable because of a feeling. Feelings are weaknesses that control us. Contradictory or not, we don't like to admit that we've lost because we're less manly than another man. A woman can choose another woman, and that's none of our business; she's interested in something else. But for a woman to compare us to another man and simply choose is perhaps the greatest humiliation. What does the other man have that I don't? What can he do that I can't? There were three of us dogs in heat over Clara Palacios, and the others, well, I won't even mention them. Santos, the guy from the bar; Valverde, who was married but didn't care; and Aníbal, the kid from the workshop who adored her but knew she was out of his reach because of her age." It was he who had the idea, I think, if I remember correctly, as a game, a fantasy. And it was we, the adults, who thought it could turn out to be something sinisterly fun. We were resentful, it's true, because of the contempt she showed us by making us wait, knowing she could no longer pay the rent or the old woman's medicine. The pharmacist Valverde gave her most of it for free, but she never received any favors in return. Santos, the one from the bar and store, did the same, and received nothing more than a smile. Amílcar invited her to a performance at the Colón Theater; she, however, didn't accept, but she liked his pretty-boy looks. I would talk to her about politics, and people would see us standing on a corner talking, engrossed in the arguments. But afterward, just a greeting and nothing more. She noticed, and tested the waters. Anyway, we planned the game so that we would be the ones to decide once and for all. But to keep things fair, chance would choose. Like in the national teams, kid, you know? It's

all a mess, like the tango says, the bible and the water heater are the same thing in the end.
-But damn it, Méndez. Leave the verbosity for your speeches and tell us once and for all what you planned.
A raffle. Towards the end of the year, the school organized fairs and a dinner to raise funds for the following year. The kids performed, and local folk groups came to play. The raffle tickets for the tables we'd catered and other prizes had been on sale for two months. Nobody knew, except us, that Clara was one of those prizes. At the right moment, the bag with the numbers—into which some little girl chosen from the audience would blindly reach to draw a number—would be replaced by many blank slips of paper with a few names written on them. The moment the surprise prize would be announced. This time, we agreed to play fair. There would only be one slip of paper with each person's name on it. We shook hands, like true gentlemen, that last night at the bar. May the best man win, we told each other. The die was cast. Aníbal, who was out of the loop and would go unnoticed among the other boys, would be in charge of changing the bags under the stage platform. Afterward, I came to the brothel, this same one. Different girls, but the same gossip. They were always complaining that the women in the neighborhood looked down on them, the housewives, and especially the teachers, who, because they worked decently, thought they had the right to look down on them. If they had to choose, the prostitutes said, they'd prefer to be housewives waiting for their husbands with the food ready and the table set. Delusions, of course, dreams with which to defend themselves from the truth they lived in. That night, they were talking and complaining as usual, and I heard Clara's first and last name. "That little goody-two-shoes, so conceited, ate the baker's pastries, and she's pregnant." Was it true? Could it be true? These women don't lie for no reason; they lie to hurt, and Clara wasn't there. I could doubt it, but it also seemed very possible. I imagined Rodrigo Casas in front of the bakery oven, in the dead of night, outside on the street still dark, inside, the warmth of the fire. And beside him, Clara. Both sweating from the heat. Her hair tied back with a scarf, beads of perspiration on her forehead, her clothes dusted with flour that whitened her features, and the smile with which she tried to disguise her exhaustion and the heat. And he, in the sleeveless shirt he always wore to work, and the white apron stained with

dulce de leche. What more could he do than what he did? He wasn't a rapist, and she was finally in a place where it wasn't cold, where a man was there with arms not too strong, but strong enough to hold her. I would have done the same. I thought about it all night and all the next day, until the party started. Aníbal had left the raffle bag in a sack under the stage. She left; she had other things to do, like organizing the performing groups, setting up the tables, and selling drinks and empanadas. Wine for the adults, and Coca-Cola for the kids. I snuck under the table, took out the slips of paper with our names on them, and replaced them with the same number of slips of paper, each bearing the same name. When the time came, what had to happen, happened. Clara's surprise, indignation, and humiliated escape. But she would return, of course, because even before our game, she belonged to Casas.

-So that was the betrayal my godfather cannot forgive you for.

- Would you forgive her, darling?

-But your intention was…

" The road to hell is paved with good intentions. That's how they say it, right? Just ask that whore," he said, pointing his thumb backwards towards the kitchen, "as full of proverbs as she is of cum."

6

The mayoral campaign continued as it always does in big cities. Whoever won would have a major boost for the governorship or even a Senate seat. But Méndez wasn't one to draft bills and study laws; he was there to lead, not even to organize, I'd say. In that, my godfather was right. There are politicians who are all show, so to speak; others who slowly rise based on their own merits, if they manage to rise at all; and then there are those who truly have the power and skill to devise and lead party strategies. You don't know how they do it, but they manage to seduce the electorate not only with demagoguery, even though that's their main weapon. Méndez was one of those who convinces first with his manly and down-to-earth appearance,

the subtle blend of the necessary education with what they call a short fuse.

I overheard him the day after the meeting, when he was wide awake and lucid, talking to the neighbors on the corner a few meters from the barbershop. Someone had painted insults against him and the communists on the wall next to the vacant lot beside the business. Weeds grew unchecked, fueled by the inertia of the municipal government, which was run by the radicals from the faction closest to Amílcar's. These graffiti were an everyday occurrence, appearing in the early morning hours, and no one bothered to erase them, even though they were done on the fronts of houses belonging to families who had nothing to do with militant politics. But long walls were ideal, and the one next to the shop was perfect not only because of its length and height, but also because its proximity betrayed the direct target. It was like painting insults directly on the communist barber's forehead, or at least slapping an ignominious sign on his back.

He walked straight into the bar from the opposite sidewalk, and it was one of the neighborhood kids who told him to come out and look. I was with him that morning; we'd left the brothel at seven, showered at his place—or rather, a shabby rented room at the end of a long, roofless hallway. I was supposed to go see Clara when I heard the boy shouting, alarmed.

- Don Antonio! Come, come, look!

He was a boy of thirteen or fourteen, one of those who worked for him distributing proselytizing pamphlets, going from house to house and business to business, talking like parrots about things they didn't understand at all. They repeated what they had heard Méndez say and what he had instructed them to memorize. If they had used that memory in school, they wouldn't have needed that job, which paid nothing more than a few pesos at the end of the day, which they gave to their parents or spent on cigarettes.

Antonio followed the boy into the vacant lot because the plants were tall, the thistles especially; they looked like palm trees in a rainforest. That was the impression I got the first time I saw that vacant lot. It was a kind of miniature jungle, a caricature of a South American banana republic. However, the graffiti was written in red paint and at a certain height, above the bushes. Up close, you couldn't see it in detail, but from the opposite sidewalk, it was clear and brutal.

“Méndez, traitor. Sellout. Stalin’s butcher.”
These weren't mere references to the campaign; they went straight to his socialist ideas. He had no reason to be so angry; he was already hardened to that kind of gossip, which wounded him where it didn't understand, for lack of anything else. Or perhaps it wounded him at the core of his personal history, or his history as a local politician. He didn't live better than any other lower-middle-class person, but that didn't mean the rumors I'd heard those days in the streets of La Plata weren't true, rumors that only confirmed what Amílcar had told me. He received money from abroad, from the fishing boats that anchored in Ensenada, from ordinary sailors who changed out of their work clothes, took the bus to La Plata, and met him at the barbershop—the curtains drawn, of course—almost always in the late afternoon. And what did he do with that money? Did he invest it? I don't think he had the shrewdness for economic growth. Perhaps they were rubles, or something like that, and I couldn't exchange them or use them as blank checks. So that money passed from hand to hand, in small amounts, in little businesses that also helped support the committees and cover campaign expenses. These boys, the ones who were smoking and talking nonsense, oblivious to the secrets they were revealing, told me that many Russians and others who weren't Russian had paid off debts, especially to the storehouse and the hospital. Babies died very often, and the old people coughed and coughed until one day they fell silent. And the men and women, especially from the slums, from the poor countryside around, received an envelope, sometimes a leather bag, other times simply a younger horse for the cart, or eventually a decent coffin.
Antonio Méndez emerged from the weeds with the sleeves of his apron covered in burrs and the collar buttons undone, stumbling over stones and mud, until he reached the sidewalk where several neighbors had gathered at the shouts of the boys, spokespeople for the outrage.
- The same old criminals again! They have nothing against me but what I'm most proud of: my ideals and my passion for the workers!
They cheered him with raucous shouts, even though he was just a few steps away, telling him not to worry, that the people supported him. Then I remembered one of my godfather's greatest fears. Perón, imprisoned, might be released due to the pressure that public opinion and the media were exerting in Buenos Aires. Méndez didn't care whether that happened

or not; nothing connected him to Perón, even though the colonel's past was as murky, or even more so, than his own. Those connections with the armed forces didn't convince him, but they were necessary. The people had no weapons; the people didn't know how to fight except with insults and punches, and they soon grew tired of it. They had to be educated in the revolution, guided by being told what they had to do to achieve their longed-for demands. Ahead of them, the people, the multitude, the sea of men with their arms raised, marching with great strides toward the plazas of the country, virilely shouting the songs of power. Behind them, the armies and weapons, at the service of the people?

This was Amílcar's question, a question that by then had become a certainty. All the while, he was afraid of what was already happening. And while Méndez shouted back what everyone says in those situations—the certainties that the marching crowd relies on, the noble words of tolerating the opposition when in reality he was exacerbating hatred—I was talking to, or rather listening to and watching, the boys. They were all neighbors' children, all teenagers. The older ones were smoking on the corner, giving orders to the younger ones, some of them eleven or twelve years old. I asked them, sitting on the low wall of the vacant lot, surrounded by ants and smelling the stench of dog or cat feces they threw there, if they liked this job.

The three who surrounded me, anxious and admiring of my suit, my profession, or whatever they might have heard about me in recent days, were very different in appearance: one with fiery red hair, another with a face as dark as a Siberian Russian, and the third with brown hair resembling my godfather. This last one was the youngest, thirteen, he told me; the oldest was sixteen, already sporting a thick, half-grown, dark beard. The middle one was fifteen, and he smiled, his pearly teeth peeking through his curly red hair and the mustache that was just beginning to sprout and which he would never shave. He told me this because girls like mustaches, especially if they're as unusual as his. The others laughed and pushed him.

"You're right," I said, and then they stopped bothering him and got serious. "So tell me, does Méndez give you money to take your girlfriends out?" Amid laughter and jeers, they tried to say they had girlfriends and money, but the lie was obvious for both things.

"Don't get worked up, women complicate everything, don't they?" I asked, looking at the older man to draw him into my complicity. "You must know about that, right, kid?" I gave him a friendly slap on the beard; he laughed, stern and self-assured. He looked at the others mockingly, as if to say: "See? The doctor realizes it; we're both men, and you're still just kids."
- And how are they doing in school?
This time the three of them looked at each other in embarrassment.
"But hey, we have to go. These days you have to learn things if you want to support Mr. Méndez. Do you want to spend your life handing out flyers or become president and representatives?"
"I want to be president," said the youngest, and while the others made fun of him, the speech and the neighbors grew in intensity and number.
- And what's your name, Mr. President?
-Luciano Catafalco.
I laughed and coughed, surprised. I didn't want to make fun of the Italian idiot, so I asked the other one, the redhead.
-Krakovsky, doctor.
- Are you related to the congressman?
"He's my uncle," he said proudly, and as the older man was losing ground, he sat down next to me, crossed his legs, started smoking like a gangster, and extended his hand:
-Baldomero Spilanovitch, at your service, comrade.
I shook his hand, strong like that of a dockworker or factory worker.
- You work, right?
He shrugged; something about it didn't convince him.
-Yes, doctor, I operate a machine.
Then the other kids jumped on him.
"What machine? What machine?" they shouted at him. "It cleans floors, doctor..."
"So what's wrong with that?" I said rudely.
They both fell silent.
"I'm not asking you," I told the redhead, because the congressman's perpetual protection was obvious, as long as he held the position, of course, and as long as he had the money to get his nephew a job. "And you, man?" I asked the older one, the floor cleaner at the factory. "What do you want to be?"

He looked at me shyly, far removed from any boasting.
-I would like to be like you, doctor.
I observed his face, its skin covered in premature hair, promising a man he wasn't yet. His black eyes spoke to me from a great distance, not toward the expanse of a horizon his surname suggested, of steppes and vast plains, but a distance of depth. I saw him kneeling, washing the floors of a tannery, but no, that wasn't the right premonition. I saw him washing the oil from ammunition, the lubricants from rifles, being sent from one place to another, cleaning toilets and latrines, showers and clogged sewers. I heard the gunshots, the groans of the soldiers, and then I saw him washing the blood from the tiled floor, and crawling on all fours, following the trail of blood to the battlefield, and then, like an idiot, trying to wash the blood from the earth, which was already swallowing it, as if in that way he could salvage something from death. He, the one who cleaned. He, like me, tried to clean up the filth of the sick in the hospital, because that's the job of doctors: to extract the disease and throw it on the floor. When we realize it, what's pooled on the floor is the patient's blood.
I put a hand on his shoulder.
-Next time, hey, I'll come pick you up and take you to Buenos Aires, would you like that?
He started crying like a boy, because that's what he still was, a man's promise that would never be fulfilled. Why the hell didn't I take him that afternoon? Why didn't I take all three of them if they were friends and buddies? We said goodbye, shaking hands with that pride of comrades and men, with that flash of arrogance and grandeur that you rarely feel, but as soon as I let go of the youngest's hand, he looked at me with the eyes of an abandoned dog. God, he was even still wearing shorts.
The meeting was ending, Méndez ordered the crowd to disperse and called the boys. They ran immediately.
Damn hiccups, I thought. Who is Antonio Méndez, really? I would return to Buenos Aires, but the answers always slipped through my fingers and went the other way. Amílcar and Méndez mocked me, and I felt like that boy I left floating in the mud of useless hopes.

I left for Buenos Aires, leaving behind the incubus that had begun to sow the seeds of the tragedies that would soon unfold. It was a week later that

we learned from the news that Clara had committed suicide. It was the Friday after I left. I knew she was preparing the charity meeting to raise funds for the foundation for disabled and cancer patients that she had started after her diagnosis some time before. It was a pious idea, everyone in the neighborhood said; the priest had given his blessing at the time, but then withdrew, they said, because it came to light that a large part, if not all, of the funds had been contributed by Méndez. Between this support from a self-proclaimed left-wing political group and the rumors of a clandestine affair between them, the priest stepped aside. Clara no longer asked for his support; she didn't need it. She had the money, the place (the hall at the club's headquarters, of course), and the neighborhood's support for the fair, the raffles, and the dinner. They were amateur magicians, folk groups with a sorry presence. And in the midst of all that, the police entered without needing to force a single door. With the butts of their rifles, they knocked over the tables, smashed the ceiling decorations and garlands. Someone had denounced the Foundation for fraud; it was said that the intended money was being diverted to illegal purposes, but above all, that it came from even more dubious sources. Everyone had looked at Antonio Méndez that night, when silence fell after the rough sweep of the modern police bayonets. The commissioner in charge of the operation wasn't from the area; he had been sent from another jurisdiction to avoid suspicion, which, of course, was implicit from the start. For Méndez, it was probably nothing more than a little bit of fun, but he felt sorry for Clara. She stood in the middle of the courtyard, the protagonist of the evening, the representative of the Foundation. She remained still, like a firm and unmoving column, the focal point of all the eyes that were judging her: the neighbors and the few sick women who didn't yet need to be hospitalized and who collaborated with her, who trusted her. She couldn't bear it. So many months of pain and sorrow, of thinking of life as a useless resource to be held onto indefinitely, only to have it snatched away without warning one day, had created this void into which the opportunity of that night fit perfectly, like nothing more precise in her entire life, like an equation surrounded by emptiness, nothing before or after it. Pure precision, to the point of becoming absolute.

The black substance of the night was emptiness and everything. That's why she ran the few steps that separated her from Antonio, pressed herself

against him as if she were embracing him, and snatching the revolver he always carried in a shoulder holster, shot herself.
As I was told, it was a Greek tragedy in the neighborhood. Casas, after recovering from his shock, spent months trying to comfort Laura, who that night screamed and shrieked hysterically. The ambulance, by then useless, more police officers, forced interrogations that led nowhere, and the Social Club that reopened its doors a week later, once the mess had been cleared and the bloodstains removed from the tiles. The bakery remained closed for a few days, then reopened, but the bread wasn't the same. Oscar, Méndez's nephew and Casas's apprentice, was in charge of the kitchen; Laura was too depressed for her father to resume his morning routine of cooking and selling. But when sales dwindled and pastries rotted on the shelves and in the baskets, Rodrigo Casas finally took the reins again, and everything returned to normal, or at least it seemed that way.
The barbershop also closed for almost two weeks. Oscar, that quiet, sullen, and ubiquitous boy, when Casas fired him, went to live with his uncle and became a barber's apprentice, at least for the time Méndez let pass for the political waters to calm. The elections were approaching, but he wasn't as well-positioned as before. Who had made the denunciation? After much thought, he concluded that it could have been anyone, even one of his comrades. In party politics, there are no loyalties; he knew that well.
I found him leafing through the morning paper, sitting on the stool by the mirror. The moment we glanced at each other in the reflection, I felt a poisonous sensation. What was it? A pain that seemed to emanate from the wall and pierce through the mirror, reflecting not the image itself but its metamorphosis.
We didn't hug.
Oscar was wearing his spotless apron, waiting in front of the mirror, sharpening his knife on the leather.
- Hello - I said.
"Good morning, doctor," he replied.
"You see, the kid's learning," Méndez said, leading me to the armchair. He gave his nephew some pointers, and the boy got to work. Meanwhile, Méndez talked to me, spouting nonsense about the campaign situation. Clara's ghost was a lost idea struggling to survive in the neighborhood's collective memory, but it was rejected in every house and business, and it

would slip away to the sidewalk in search of a limbo where it could atone for its supposed sins. But each place already had its own sins to atone for; perhaps older ghosts had occupied the spot before, and it's said that spirits are more jealous and possessive than the living.
Oscar smeared cream all over my face. Méndez asked me about Amílcar. He did it on purpose, knowing I couldn't elaborate for fear of moving my jaw or making any gesture that might provoke the razor's edge. Then I thought that Antonio had found a kind of right-hand man, not just for business; but like any right-hand man, not entirely reliable.
During a pause, I replied:
-And... you can imagine, Méndez. My godfather is angry.
That was an understatement. When Amílcar found out everything, he threw the newspaper out the balcony and locked himself in the bathroom for half an hour. I heard the sound of the toilet paper he used to blow his nose, the flushing of the toilet, the opening and closing of the medicine cabinet door, and the running faucets in the sink. He was probably injecting himself, if his crying allowed it. When he came out, he grabbed my shoulders and said, “Do you realize, Berto, that everything that guy touches gets killed?” I tried to console him, though I had no consolation other than that which time provides. But his expression held more fury than despair or sadness. “What are you going to do?” I asked, afraid of giving him ideas of revenge, of granting him tacit permission with my simple question, but he didn't need ideas or permission from anyone. The inevitable incubus that every man possesses was conceiving a new tragedy.
La Prensa again , hiding from the little scene that unfolded later in La Plata, like a director trusting his stage manager: the startled movement I made when he called me for the first time in that way only my godfather ever did, a way that placed my throat against the edge of Oscar’s razor. The superficial, bleeding cut, the piece of paper he used to stop the bleeding, the whispered apologies as he glanced sideways at my uncle behind the newspaper, who undoubtedly heard everything, like a god behind the scenes.
I left the barbershop and the city with the warning printed on the side of my neck, like a simple scratch, it's true, but it burned a lot in the midday sun.

7

I knew my godfather had nothing to do with the complaint or the raid. What Méndez feared was the political manipulation he would use to get rid of him for good.

Weeks passed. I didn't return to La Plata, but I contacted Casas occasionally because he had asked me for help with Laura's depression. I recommended a specialist at my hospital, and in those brief, awkward phone calls, we talked about what was happening in the neighborhood, trying to distance ourselves a bit from the personal drama. However, everything in that place was intertwined: the personal and the public couldn't be separated. If the topic of the mayoral campaign came up, we'd end up discussing the events of that Black Friday at the fair, and if we talked about how his daughter was doing, comments about Méndez's reputation would surface. It had plummeted to the point where the graffiti was no longer just on the wall of the vacant lot, because there was no more room to write, but all over the surrounding area. I couldn't detect sarcasm or satisfaction in Casas's tone, even though I listened closely to his voice on the phone. Who was this man? An insensitive person or a soul beyond all resentment? He was a god in pain, I think, the one who hides behind the walls of silence and barely murmurs obscenities from time to time, protecting his soul behind the windows of his business, afraid of himself, perhaps.

One day I was at the hospital, finishing my shift, when the receptionist called me out:

- Doctor, wait, they're calling you!

I turned around from the doorway and saw the woman yelling at me with the phone receiver in her hand and her arm outstretched.

"Berto," I heard in the earpiece. It was Méndez's voice, hoarse, worn out, as if he had been crying.

- What's wrong, Antonio?

"They killed the boys, Berto," and before I hung up, because he couldn't continue speaking, I heard the lump in his throat burst with anguish.

When I arrived, I had to park five blocks away. The police and the municipality had blocked off access to the neighborhood. There were dozens of journalists and cameramen everywhere. I showed my medical ID to several officers and finally managed to reach the block where the barbershop was. The neighbors were huddled in groups that the police were trying to keep away from the vacant lot, because that's where the bodies were. As I walked by, I overheard snippets of conversations and disjointed words, but they all spoke of indignity, of revenge, and all those phrases like "they'll pay dearly" and "war has been declared." The murders had begun, and the three boys I had met a few days before were dead. The three who worked together for Méndez, as if protecting each other, were in the vacant lot, among the tall thistles that some municipal employees were now trying to hack away with machetes, with no one supervising to ensure that no traces were erased or potential evidence destroyed. So much surveillance, I told myself, was simply to give the appearance of importance to the events in front of the journalists who, in the end, formed public opinion.

Méndez approached me and hugged me.

-Berto, you knew them, my dear, you were one of those who spoke so highly of you when you left, so young, so young…

Antonio was inconsolable, it was obvious, but there was a streak of extreme excitement that I attributed to the nervousness of the situation, but which I had also seen when he spoke in public, and he was at his best when something outraged him. Then those words would tumble out in a rush, the words that had so greatly elevated him from the man of the people to a leader of the masses.

I went into the vacant lot. It was the first time I'd ventured into that garbage dump, which I'd compared to a tropical rainforest, and I was surprised to find furrows and paths cut through the tall thistles, which I'd never seen grow so high. They were just over two meters tall, perfect, I thought, for hiding any man. The men wielding machetes made way for me, and one of them parted the thorny branches that stung like hell at the slightest touch. I was wearing loafers and a winter jacket, which protected me from the plants' scratches, but not my face or hands. By the time I reached the wall, my sleeves and pants were covered in Velcro.

The three bodies lay in different positions on the floor. The oldest, the one who wanted to be a doctor, was lying with his back against the wall, his head slumped to one shoulder, his hands open on the floor. The redhead was face down, his pants sagging; perhaps he had been raped before or after being killed. The youngest was face up, his legs twisted and his arms broken, as if he had tried to escape by kicking and hitting.
The three of them had been shot, with several shots, against the wall, which was stained with blood with figures that looked like maps of unknown worlds, and which covered the political graffiti forever.
They hadn't been tied up, hence the various positions that indicated different attempts at resistance or passivity. The oldest, the strongest, was the one who had to stay still. And the other two, poor things, who knew what or how much they had fought or suffered. I examined the bodies; they were almost rigid, and the blood was dried.
"When were the bodies discovered?" I asked the officer who appeared behind me a short while later.
-Around noon. A teacher was walking along the sidewalk and saw the agitated dogs going in and out of the vacant lot, and when she looked out, well…she ran to the police station.
It was in the middle of the night, probably before dawn. That's what I told Commissioner Méndez . I asked if anyone heard the gunshots, or the boys' screams. They both looked at me, the three of them sitting in the barbershop, and shrugged.
"No one is making a statement, doctor," the commissioner told me.
"They're afraid of them, but I'm not, Berto. They're going to pay for this."
Méndez stood up when he saw the acting mayor enter. They shook hands as a sign of temporary reconciliation. I was introduced as Domínguez's godson, and Dr. Farías showed interest in my presence.
-I know the congressman, doctor. Are you in charge of autopsies?
-I understand I was called in as a friend, nothing more. There must be other colleagues assigned to these cases.
Farías looked at the colleague accompanying him, they whispered for a few seconds, then he looked at Méndez, and said:
"I believe the most eminent person for this case is Dr. Ibáñez. He's teaching at the University of Buenos Aires, but we'll call him. Did they take charge of collecting the bodies, Commissioner?"

Commissioner Saldívar cleared his throat, stroked his mustache, and excused himself by saying that they were waiting for the medical examination before lifting them.
The mayor looked at me.
- And what time do you think they were killed, doctor?
-In the middle of the night, mayor, one or two hours before dawn.
He looked at his wristwatch.
"It's six o'clock in the afternoon. Why didn't you call a court doctor earlier, Méndez? The doctor came all the way from Buenos Aires at your request, as a friend and advisor, I've seen, but he's not responsible for these unforgivable oversights. And tell me, Saldívar, I assume you've gathered witnesses and identified some suspects."
The mayor must have read a lot of detective novels and watched a lot of film noir, perhaps. His imagination, which he tried to inject into the reality around him, was commendable, even if it didn't quite fit.
-Nothing for now, Mayor. These political crimes, you know how it is…
"Well, tell that to the boys' parents, commissioner. They're out there crying and demanding answers. I know, I know, I'm the one who should face the music."
He buttoned his overcoat, put on his gloves and hat. He went out onto the sidewalk. Journalists were hounding him, parents were demanding answers. We didn't hear what he said, but he calmed everyone down. The Farías family had that gift of persuasion; I knew a few of them in Buenos Aires.

The funerals unfolded amidst scenes reminiscent of an Italian film. Women in mourning and veils, men in hats and black suits with crepe on their arms, and much weeping and shouting. A few shots rang out in the distance as the three coffins entered the cemetery in three separate cars. Many wreaths were laid, including those from the governor, the president, and the Chamber of Deputies. Orestes Giraldo also arrived and delivered the final eulogy, ensuring it was clear that the boys had been victims of the ruling party's parliamentary mafia. He was far too cultured and respected to be booed in the middle of the cemetery. His speech appeared in full in the socialist-leaning newspapers of Buenos Aires, and abridged in the others. The funeral expenses were entirely covered by the state, of course;

Farías made sure of that. Even though the families belonged to the opposing ideology he had long been fighting against, the boys were not to blame. And also, why not, it would be very well received by the opposition themselves. The damage and negligence witnessed by the landowner, the police station, and the court had to be rectified somehow.
Dr. Ptolemy Ibáñez arrived after the bodies had been buried. “What?” he said, surprised, when he arrived the day after being summoned to his lecture. It was five days after the murder. “You arrived too late, Doctor, and the bodies were decomposing,” they told him. I was present at the courthouse that morning, and I introduced myself to Ibáñez, an eminent figure in forensic criminology. He seemed confused by this response, as if he were being reprimanded for his lateness. He composed himself and said:
"Commissioner, please be advised that the consultation request was relayed to me yesterday at nine o'clock at night at my home. If they didn't have doctors assigned to the case, they should have requested a consultation from the Association of Forensic Physicians as soon as the bodies were discovered. Here, Dr. Ruiz has already explained the chronology of events to me. The doctor is not a specialist, and it wasn't his duty, nor is it within his expertise, to take on this responsibility."
-Nobody asked you to do that, doctor.
-Exactly, Commissioner. They put him in a very uncomfortable situation, to say the least, and I would even say confusing. Isn't that right?
Ibáñez was leading me to his folds; he wanted to save me because he knew my godfather.
-They just put their name on forms to fill them out.
"We've done what we could. Dr. Ruiz examined the bodies and gave his opinion on the causes of death, which were already obvious. The rest is police work to find the killer."
The mayor, who, of course, was sitting at the table, tapping his fingers and listening to the good work that Ibáñez was doing, intervened.
"You put it very well, Saldívar. The doctor offered his opinion, exclusively, having been called in by the landowner as a personal friend and advisor. But let's leave that aside; here we're challenging your actions, Commissioner. You didn't notify the court in time, the judge didn't order an autopsy, no testimonies were collected, and no clues were searched at the crime scene. The killer hid among the thistles. And now I ask myself, why

assume it's just one person and not more than one? Here, Dr. Ruiz, with his perspicacity, even though he's not a specialist—and this is to his credit in this whole strange situation he's been put in—has explained to us the reasons to suspect that the boys were murdered at different times."
Saldívar, who was lost, shrugged. He looked at Méndez, silent as a shadow in a corner.
-It's just a figure of speech, boss.
It was his last sentence on duty. The next day he was discharged. The case was passed from hand to hand; Dr. Ibáñez didn't request the exhumation because it wasn't within his power to do so. He wrote an article subtly alluding to municipal corruption—in every household, throughout the country—because the situation was tense. The power of the people was being felt as a subterranean movement lacking discernment.
The following month, the disfavor Méndez had suffered due to the rumors of corruption in Clara's case and the foundation had been reversed, elevating him to the status of a martyr. The boys he had given work to and kept away from vices had been mercilessly murdered by his political opponents. He would find out who they were, he told anyone who would listen at committee meetings, while shaving his clients, or at dinner parties. He shook hands with all the neighbors and it took him half an hour to walk a block. There was no more graffiti on the wall. The thistles remained tall, and the vacant lot was preserved as it always had been, a site of suffering for political martyrs. No garden was created, nor were any commemorative plaques placed. The thistles that someone had planted long before concealed malice and innocence, and the paths between them were roads along which a good man had to make his way. I'm repeating all this almost verbatim from the sermon the parish priest gave the Sunday after the funeral. This slum priest, though that wasn't the term used back then, was doing his best to stay in the diocese.
When I returned to Buenos Aires, I went by train. I left the car at a repair shop because the radiator was punctured and the timing belt had broken, among other things. A commendable nighttime job was done outside the boarding house where I usually stayed. The terms, then, were defined, at least in the lower echelons. In the upper echelons, however, it was very easy to confuse ideologies or simple political positions with expediency. My connections, my protectors, combated setbacks with cunning: the

absurdities and stupidities of opponents are often points in their favor, as happened with the police commissioner and all his people, including the judge. But it was all for naught.
Méndez was now gaining ground for the mayoralty, and the boys had served him better than ever.

8

I went to find Amílcar at his office on Riobamba Street. Nearby, downtown Buenos Aires gleamed with artificial masks that concealed the broken sidewalks and the vagrants lounging on the doorsteps of closed banks. It was a street and sidewalk of office workers, a place he had chosen because he liked to lean out from his narrow balcony and observe the swarming of the dirty ants called men and women, especially in the morning, with that ultimately pointless hustle and bustle that is work in the city. Cars and pedestrians clashed with each other, and then he would raise his gaze to the silvery river, oblivious to the insignificance of humanity. There he would think up his parliamentary speeches, with only a secretary, or a male secretary if he grew tired of the women. With the men, he spoke of the misery and obscenity of the world, without mincing words, without offense. With the women, he had to be more discreet if he didn't want trouble. With them, the nakedness of the soul; with them, the hypocrisy of cunning. The result was a series of typed pages, typed late at night. If it was a willing girl, like Sonia, for example, he'd whip out his penis right there, that's what he told me, on the carpet. Then, the elevator down to the ground floor, both of them silent, they'd say goodbye on the sidewalk with a kiss on the cheek, and then he'd go for a drink at one of the bars on Corrientes.
This time I was alone in the office, the desk light on the silent Remington. I was writing in a notebook, crossing things out every few words, scribbling until finally I tore out the page, crumpled it, and threw it on the floor. I was doing that when I opened the door; I had my own key, of course.
Lacking inspiration?
- Psst!

He threw everything onto the desk, lowered his legs, which were propped up on the table, and with his hands in his trouser pockets, his shirt open and his suspenders creasing it, went out onto the balcony, pushed the old empty flowerpot aside, and leaned his elbows against it. Night was falling. I accompanied him in silence for a while.
"And the mine, man?" I asked.
-She got lost, but she'll find herself soon enough, don't you think?
-They usually do, Amílcar. But who can understand them?
"It's better if we're alone, Berto. Men understand each other. Look over there," he said, pointing toward Congress. "The country's biggest whorehouse, my friend. Everyone with everyone else, it's the only way to keep the peace..."
He wasn't laughing; he had already repeated those verses many times, and they had lost their charm.
- How's your friend doing?
-He's not my friend, I already told you.
-Yes, I know, you were spying for me. Think of it that way, if it suits you, I have no problem with that.
I confronted him.
-But tell me something, do you think I'm betraying you? You're obsessed with that, everyone's against you, everyone's plotting against you…
The honking increased in the street, fourteen floors below.
"See that, Berto? The blacks are coming, my friend. They'll be getting Pocho out of jail soon, and if I were you, I'd stay up here, where the smoke from the burning cars and the stench of the slum don't reach so strongly."
-But the bullets did…
He put his arm around my shoulders, and we leaned on the railing, trying to figure out what was causing the commotion. Just an accident? No. The Peronist chant, fresh off the press, was catchy, a masterpiece of propaganda.
"I know what happened to the kids really got to you, you told me. That's how those sons of bitches are, capable of killing each other to blame us. It's a no-holds-barred war, kid. You're starting to realize it. It's a good thing you became a doctor. You're not cut out for this kind of work. Come on, let's go inside."
We closed the French doors and sat down in the armchair.

- Do you think he's going to win?
-Yes, the mayor's office is safe. What are you going to do?
"I'm preparing a speech for the next session to veto freedom of religion. If we win with that at the national level, at least we'll kick the can down the road for a while longer."
-What if a revolution comes?
-One more, what difference does it make? In two or three months, a year at the most, the counter-revolution. The people don't know how to govern, my dear, and the fool they want to put in charge is a complete idiot.
-But people support him...
That's nothing, the problem is that the army is doing it, and that worries me. That's why we have to keep them happy with lots of money. Uniforms cost money, just like a good education.
-But...
"Didn't the leftists teach you any other words, dear? I know that as a doctor in a public hospital, you've developed a social conscience and all that crap. Do you think 'the people' are only the poor? We are all 'the people.' I also have skin and bones like a factory worker from Mataderos. I also do drugs and I could die of cancer."
-What I mean is...
"Nothing, Berto, nothing, I'm not listening anymore. Méndez is a beast, but every time I try to bring him down he rises like a phoenix."
- What do you mean? If it's about the club...
-Leave that nonsense aside...
-If it's for Clara...
Silence and muteness for five seconds where the world stopped turning, and my heart felt dizzy in the inertia, in the passive movement of the stopped world.
"He killed her countless times. When he took her from me and sold her to Casas, when he tricked her again in her later years, when he convinced her to start the foundation. I know she wanted it, but he exploited her compassion for his own gain..."
-They say, Amílcar, that he has used the money to help many people.
My dear devil's advocate, helping a few isn't being good, it's being cunning. You gain more from the people's utopias than from unfettered capitalism.

I got up and poured myself a whiskey. I hadn't eaten anything, and there was a lunchtime sandwich in the office refrigerator. I went back to the armchair, turning my thought over in my mind.
- What would you do to stop him?
Looking at me seriously, he snatched the sandwich from me, took a bite, and gave it back to me.
Don't get carried away with spy movies or mafia stories. I'm not going to have him killed.
Was he serious? He was high, but this time he'd taken a low dose. He knew what he was saying, and he was hiding his feelings.
- Is that why you didn't get married?
- What got into your head, Berto? Why so much interest in Clara and me?
-I want to understand…
"You don't have to understand anything. Things are the way they are, no matter how much you try to understand them. When you get tired of it, you lose interest, and you accept it as it comes. I'm not a guinea pig for you to analyze. I'm a man, a fool if you want, whatever you like, whom you should accept without question."
I turned on the radio. Beethoven's Fifth Symphony played in its entirety, without interruption. Chewed cold cuts, crumbled bread, and spilled whiskey on the armchair. Two half-drunk men pondering fate and destiny, which another man, perhaps more than a century before, had fully understood.
"Poor old deaf man..." Amílcar said, dropping the glass that shattered on the floor. "Just look at the irony of the poor fellow. To understand the world, to have the talent to interpret it, and suddenly, bam, they take away the only instrument he needed. His attempt to understand God backfired."
I was drunk too, and I didn't realize it until the thunderous calls of the symphony echoed in my memory. The backfire, the military symbolism, and the barracks warfare.
There are reasons more ancient than war, causes born in the sorrows of the bones, for they recall the atrocities of destruction. Pity is not natural to humankind, nor is compassion. Tolerance is the great fallacy invented by fools.
Amílcar fell asleep in the armchair, sprawled out, scratching his crotch now and then. He wet himself, and I didn't care. I got up, dizzy, holding onto the

back of the chair, and went to the window, dark and now silent. I slumped back in the desk chair. I randomly flicked through the pages of the unfinished speech. Tired, I opened and closed the drawers, out of habit, out of boredom, out of unease. There was nothing in my godfather's life he could hide from me, except, perhaps, his heart. But I doubted he had one, after all, at least not with the bland definition we usually give it.

Then I found a folded piece of green paper. A sales receipt from a car dealership in La Plata. He had bought a Chevrolet Coupe. It caught my eye, so much so that I held the paper up to the desk lamp. It wasn't the kind of car he liked to drive, too luxurious, too conspicuous. He had a gray Ford that he hardly ever used. Had he sold it and traded it in? Perhaps everything that had happened had led him to make this extravagant purchase? I looked at the date; it was from just a month ago. After Clara's death, and right before, exactly two days before the boys' murder.

I was about to give up trying to find a hidden meaning, so to speak. But fatigue betrays me, and my eyes saw the name of the car's registered owner: Oscar Méndez.

He had bought a luxury car for the sixteen- or seventeen-year-old boy. He had never spent even half that amount on a gift for me at once.

But this time it was urgent, it was necessary. There was no other explanation.

I remembered the razor's edge on my neck, and the boy's face, sometimes inert and expressionless, almost always annoying and defiant. He seemed to know how to do everything, always willing to try anything and find a way to get bread, a barbershop, whatever. But what about the gun?

Commissioner Saldívar had probably taken care of that, and of insisting—or rather, his own stupidity—on the theory of a single killer. That part of the deal wouldn't have cost the godfather much.

Then the boy's face returned once more, insistent and threatening.

If a man like him, I told myself, knows how to bake bread, he can also kill.

If you know how to shave someone else, you can push the razor in a few centimeters deeper without any problem.

The only difference is the compensation.

And for many, a car is worth as much as their soul.

INES DE LOS RASTRojos

1

AND Inés's father was a farmhand in Lavalle. He lived in town, in one of the few adobe houses still standing in the old quarter, a kind of large ranch that had withstood the test of time for almost 150 years, but was crumbling when there was no one left to maintain it. The ravages of time were taking their toll, just like sickness in the Funes family. The neighbors said that Inés's grandfather was already going mad, which is saying a lot in those towns where eccentricity is confused with folksiness and unexpected outbursts. People are used to the expansiveness and sometimes unrestrained verbosity of farm workers, without the manners molded in school or the city, free from grammatical and courtly prejudices, but full of recalcitrant rejections of what is frowned upon, of what is thought ill. And above all, anything related to sex. It's there, always present, in the sweat on men's bodies, summer or winter, in their drunken revelry at the bar after work, and in the perspiration between women's breasts by the wood-fired oven. The scent of breast milk excites them as the women nurse their youngest child, and the man who can't control himself is already upon them, violent if necessary, but most of the time the women let him, eager for that attention. Strength and scent mean so much in those bleak days when sunrise and sunset are nothing more than weary routines of daily life. That's why the old ranch that occupied the entire Funes block was inhabited only by Fabio Funes and his daughter Inés. Her grandfather had died before she was born, and her mother, who knows? Some said she was

a young woman from the Sanhueza ranch, where they harvested olives, a novelty at the time. The scent of the olive grove must have permeated the skin, also olive-colored because of its dark complexion, of the teenager, or perhaps a little older, whom Fabio met in the countryside. And how could he resist? No one knew her name, nor did anyone know she was pregnant. There was a time when there was no doctor in town, and for births there was the midwife. But she didn't even have that. She gave birth, probably, in the fields, among the stubble of the last harvest. However, she wasn't completely alone.

Fabio Funes was an odd man. Sometimes easygoing, he shared the same vices and flaws as everyone else, but there were quirks that set him apart. His habit of crossing himself whenever he heard a curse word, or when he uttered one himself. Sometimes he did it for no apparent reason, or perhaps it stemmed from some hidden thought. That was it: religion, foreign to men like him, reserved for women or the pious women who attended church on Sundays, and his soliloquies when he walked alone. Did he pray? He probably ruminated on his repeated, obsessive thoughts, trying to find in that litany an explanation and a meaning that would soothe his soul. Perhaps that was what it was all about: healing the soul he had inherited already ailing. The psyche, as a doctor from a wealthy city might say, or the soul of the oppressed, in the words of a socialist, is nothing more than the transformation of sorrow into a latent cancer that grows and grows in the hearts of men, and takes over their bones, their nerves, and their brains. And their eyes are already different.

That's what she must have seen on Fabio's face that afternoon in the fields, as she tried not to scream in labor pain, because he was pressing his hand tightly against her mouth. He watched, keeping an eye out for anyone coming. It was shame, yes, and guilt kept him there, kneeling, with her head and back on his lap, telling her "push, push," just like he'd heard the midwives say. Until Inés was born, she didn't stop crying silently, her mouth covered. Fabio took the baby girl, cleaned her with his beret, and wrapped her in the knitted shawl her mother had been wearing, which she no longer needed because she was dead. He had covered her mouth, perhaps too tightly, had prevented her from breathing in his eagerness to keep quiet.

He took the little girl to the ranch. He cleaned her in the cold water basin, warmed only by the afternoon sun and the breath and tongues of the dogs and the horse that drank there. He dressed her in clothes he found in the old closets, closed for so many years, in the two rooms of the house. Clothes of his grandmother's, moth-eaten, but still sturdy enough to be mended. He knew how to sew, because what fabric could resist his hands, trained to work the leather or wool of the sheep he no longer had? An entire flock killed by the anthrax epidemic ten years before. That was what ruined him, he had told himself many times to explain his apparent irrationality, his madness that disturbed him at night, especially, but that invaded his days without him knowing how to hide it.

He bought milk at the store; they looked at him strangely. To cover his tracks, he also brought some liquor and yerba mate. He made a teat and gave it to the baby to suck on. She drank and drank inconsolably until she was seething with boredom. And she started to cry when she should have been quiet. What should he do, then?

He remembered his dead mother among the weeds and stubble. He went out at dusk with the baby wrapped in a cloth. He hoped no one had heard her crying. In one arm he carried his daughter, in the other he clutched a shovel. He found the body in the emerging mist. He laid the daughter on a small pile of warm straw, which seemed to calm down a little. He dug deep enough to bury his mother's body. He made the sign of the cross and commended her soul to God in a prayer that tried to resemble the sermon on All Souls' Day, but Latin wasn't his forte. Shame and remorse were what he felt. He looked at the baby, now asleep in the mist, her body warmed by the fresh milk, the outside world lurking, ready to kill her with its dampness. He picked her up and went back to the house. He lit a fire in the stone hearth, smoke billowing from a short chimney that barely rose above the roof. That day was Good Friday. Inés had been born on that dreadful day. Was it a duty God had commanded her to fulfill?

On Sunday, he appeared at the village church, dedicated to Our Lady of Mercy, the patron saint, before Mass. Father Macabeo was a young, strapping, fair-haired man; no one knew if he was a foreigner. He had a full beard, which he sometimes shaved, and then he looked like a handsome, baritone-voiced movie star around whom single girls and women of a

certain age would gather. They said he forgave everything in his confessions, or rather, that he understood everything.
"What are you carrying there, Funes?" she said, watching him enter the bedroom where the priest was still shaving with a razor and a little soap in front of a mirror. He lived alone in a small room behind the altar, separated from it by a thick wall that seemed impenetrable to the Christ's watchful eye.
Fabio opened the cloths and showed the creature.
"Damn it," said the priest. "I already knew something about this, that Sanhueza girl? The one no one knew where they found, without a family, like she was born out of thin air. And you took advantage of her, Funes, you made her your own, didn't you?"
Fabio knelt before the priest and buried his face in the same cloth that wrapped the baby.

Father Maccabee firmly placed a hand on his shoulder.
"We're all weak, Funes, I understand. But that's no excuse. Where's the mother?"
Fabio shrugged.
-I understand, so why are you coming then?
He raised his head to look at the priest. A kind of golden aura seemed to surround his blond head. He was a man like any other, without a cassock, wearing rustic trousers and a t-shirt that revealed his broad shoulders and chest hair. He still held the knife in his right hand. He looked like a vengeful angel. He wondered if he would exterminate him right there, behind the altar. As if he were in charge of the Savior's dirty business.
-So that you may baptize her, Father.
Then the priest washed his face, leisurely rubbed himself with a musty cologne, put on his worn cassock, then the white collar and a rectangular cloth over his shoulders. He picked up his tattered Bible and said:
-We'll do it right here, so the old ladies sitting in the atrium don't talk.
He took a bottle of holy water from a drawer, sprinkled it on the girl's forehead, and made the sign of the cross, imparting the blessing in ordinary Latin.
-That's it, Funes, you can leave in peace.
Fabio gave thanks silently, and was about to leave when the priest asked him:

- And what should I say if they ask me, Funes, about the origin of the creature?
- What, Father? She's my little girl, what else is there to say? Her mother died giving birth, she's in the countryside.
The body was found by some farmhands a week later. Corporal Prilidiano Saldívar took charge of the case for about ten days. He didn't know much, poor man; he'd been transferred several times, sometimes for being found drunk on nights when he'd been called in for political business, other times for petty fraud with the local merchants. He called the doctor before the judge, and Dr. Hermes Farías exhumed the body and examined it in his office at the hospital, with his usual nurse, old and fat, always tired, and eager to retire. He determined the cause of death to be postpartum asphyxiation.
At the police station, smoking on either side of the desk, they discussed what they were going to do. The corporal was in charge in the absence of the commissioner, who was his father, on sick leave, they said.
- And how is your father doing, Saldívar?
"Bad, doctor, he breathes like an engine," the old woman tells me, "and he could kick the bucket any minute now."
-I'm sorry, friend.
Dr. Farías was one of the black sheep of his family, despising the influence of his well-known relatives because he knew he was incapable of emulating them. Was he addicted to cocaine? That's what they said, because the nurses who used to sleep with him talked, and the gossip had overflowed the hospital and spread through the town's streets, dissolving until it dissolved into a trivial piece of news.
- You already know who the suspect is, don't you?
"Funes is a nutcase, doctor," he said, twirling a finger on his temple. "But harmless, he already knows he took care of the child..."
"That's what I've been told. Who would have thought? He behaved himself. Did you notify the judge, Saldívar?"
"I spoke with the priest, doctor. He's a great guy, you know, for a priest..."
Farías already knew; they didn't need to tell him, and he could inform the corporal about several other things as well. For example, about the abortions of young women from the neighboring estates who visited the sacristy so frequently.

- And what did he say to you?
-The same old nonsense about guilt and punishment.
They fell silent in the office as evening fell. The sun was dying of boredom behind the poplars planted a hundred years before along the road. The engines of the trucks on the highway in the distance were drowned out by the cries of the caracaras that circled the countryside in search of food.
-Neither family nor acquaintances, nor the Sanhueza family, are making any claims.
"Of course," said Saldívar , "the less fuss, the better. How many have passed through the facility in recent years? The more, the less expense."
"That's how they make money, my friend." Farías spoke, as always, resentful, he who had to clean pus and stick his fingers in shit to earn a living.
They shook hands, considering the Funes matter closed.

That's how Inés grew up with her father. From a young age, she went with him to the fields because he couldn't leave her alone. During the dry season, they spent their days at the ranch or in the yard by the old cistern, or they would come to get him to do odd jobs on the Sanhueza ranch. Those who knew the story looked at the little girl as if she were a strange creature. And she grew up thinking she was different. With fair skin and straight, dark hair, she walked with a crooked gait, a habit of avoiding other people's stares.
When she was older, she helped her father with the chores, raking the stubble of whatever harvest it was, and that smell, even the dust, clung to her hair and skin. Then the school children gave her the nickname by which she was known throughout her childhood: Inés of the Stubble, they called her, and they laughed. She would lower her head and run away, or if she was in the field with the rake in her hand, instead of threatening them, she would become absorbed in the task, because her father had told her that work is everything, and because she had seen Christ in the church with his head bowed, hanging from nails.
Silence in the face of the cawing of the caracaras.
She knew she was ugly, she knew she was stupid. At home, she barely spoke to her father, who worked from morning till night and then came home and scrubbed the floors and washed clothes in the sink. Afterward, as

a break, he would sit and smoke for ten minutes, gazing at the sunset at the end of the cobblestone street, and then he would throw away his cigarette and start brushing the downcast, blind blackbird that was now only good for pulling the cart from the fields to the hangar where the bales of hay were kept, which the train would later take to the city, because the landowners, the Sanhuezas, didn't waste even that; they made use of everything, even the stubble. And that was fine, Funes told herself, science is for learning, it wasn't a matter of throwing money away, like they did in the old days, when even dung is useful these days. Everything is processed and remade, like the death and resurrection of the Savior.

Where did Funes's faith come from? No one in the family had ever been so devoted to the church and its precepts. Perhaps his persecution complex had led him to take refuge in his beliefs. The vastness of the tragedy that had gradually brought down the rustic, rural, and aristocratic Funes family during the 19th century had always served as a safeguard, protecting him from blame, allowing him to demand compensation and request loans. Until nothing remained but the old man, senile and consumed by prostate cancer, which also finished off his inherited fortune. Only the large, dilapidated ranch and the surrounding land remained. Not even the entire block, because they had been forced to sell, and only the vacant lots around it remained, which no one bought to avoid the proximity of such filth and decay.

The neighbors grew accustomed to Inés, who, if not exactly friendly, was timid and quiet, feigning a refinement she lacked. The women would see her enter the store and whisper, the other girls would giggle, and the boys would pull her hair, and the whole crowd of gossip would erupt when the dust from the stubble fell to the floor. She endured it all; she never left without getting what she paid for with the crumpled bills her father had given her.

Santos, the storekeeper, then asked her from the other side of the high counter, where she barely peeked her head out:

"How's your dad doing? Tell him to come by tomorrow, I have a couple of things to ask him to do." And he would give her one or two candies that she always looked at with envy in the transparent jars in the display case.

When Inés turned eleven and a half, she had her first period. What was happening to her? she wondered, frightened, when, in the middle of her search, she saw blood running down her thighs. It was warm blood that soon became sticky. She lifted her skirt. Her underwear was stained with pure blood. She wasn't one to cry easily, but this time a lump of anguish formed in her throat. The problem was that she went to school every other day, more when she felt like it than because her father forced her. She had no friends; the isolation to which her appearance relegated her was only amplified by her resentful pride. She didn't ask for favors, like her father, she didn't beg for affection. That's why she hardly spoke, and no one spoke to her. And Fabio, what was he going to tell her about the biological changes of adolescence? He barely knew about them; perhaps he simply accepted them as one accepts faith in the doctor or in the miracles of the Virgin. Because there was something to it, in his opinion. How many times had he heard in Father Macabeo's sermons about the strange, the wondrous virginal conception of Mary. If women suffered that tearing, that wound, every thirty days, it was to remind them of their outcast status. All of them, even each man's mother, the Father would say from his creaking wooden chair, shared the same condition. That was why their lives were expiation through pain.

Inés ran to where Fabio was, next to the cart, shoveling piles of hay and stubble.

"What's wrong?" he asked, wiping his forehead with his beret and putting it back on.

She tried not to cry, and her lower lip bulged out as she swallowed her snot and tears. Then she saw the legs.

-Come here.

He placed his hands on her shoulders and, from his height, kissed her forehead.

-You've become a woman now, Inesita. Let's go home so I can clean you up.

Throughout the entire journey back to the village, they kept their eyes fixed straight ahead, not responding to greetings. She was frightened, he was lost in thought. They went inside, and he led her by the hand to the bathroom. It was spacious, like in the old days, with cold, mossy walls, a cobweb-covered ceiling, a sink with a single cold-water tap, a small table for placing anything, a bathtub that clashed with the rest of the room due

to its timeless incongruity, and especially with that latrine in the corner, clean, but so ancient that, for them, it was the only system known to humankind for disposing of waste. Anyone who had seen them squatting in those footprints on the floor, the dark hole gaping open like a dangerous well leading to strange worlds, would have thought they liked it. The composure with which they both accepted their condition was perhaps more admirable than their meanness or their obstinacy.

Fabio filled the bathtub with buckets of warm water he brought from the kitchen, while she waited naked, lying at the bottom. Each bucket fell slowly and gently, filling the spaces between her legs, her arms, her body, and the tiled walls. The water turned red, then pink.

Fabio poured the last bucket of water over Inés, covering her body up to her neck. He sat on the edge and began scrubbing her skin with an old sponge that no longer hurt.

"It's always going to happen to you, Inesita," he told her. "That's just how women are, what can you do?"

-But... what if I die?

"Nothing's going to happen to you, it's just a little bit of blood. God decided it that way, so you should be fine, right?"

She shrugged. She understood, perhaps, but it was her father who continued to brood over his thoughts. Another burden, he told himself, to look after the stallions that roamed the town and countryside, which, unlike him, wouldn't take responsibility for the offspring of their own seed. How could he lift this curse from Inés? he wondered. Father Macabeo liked a verse from Saint Matthew that spoke of temptation: if something makes you stumble, cut it off.

He bent over Inés and began to dry her.

"It itches," Inés said, pointing to her genitals.

There were still clots of dried blood that hadn't come out. He rubbed them in, and when they were stubborn, he rubbed a little more, until Inés's skin turned red. She didn't cry; she looked him in the eyes. He then washed her as he had the rest of her body, without precautions, as naturally as he did with her hair. Fabio's hand was an instrument with five flexible and soft appendages, yet strong enough not to break and to penetrate without faltering.

From that day on, every time the same thing happened, she would get into the bathtub and wait for the warm water and her father's hands to cleanse her of the curse, at least until the next time. And since this would surely last her whole life, she felt, for the first time, a kind of equilibrium that brought her peace. This certainty in the repetition of a certain event and its subsequent resolution gave her a rhythm that was more personal than the routine she had lived until then. Waking up, eating, raking, dealing with people. All of that was external. But what was happening to her now was intimate and unique, a kind of secret that defined her to herself. And for it to be a secret, two were needed: the protagonist and her accomplice. Now she was bound to her father in a way she had never known before. A child's kisses and hugs could be directed at anyone, but the contact with Fabio was unique.

She slept with him. She would ask questions, he would answer, sometimes tired and half-asleep.

Then it wasn't just the hand anymore; it was Fabio's body on top of his, and the pain he felt he offered to the cross that hung on the wall above the head of the bed. The pain became a habit, to the point where he believed he needed it, and later, that he loved it.

However, Inés was still too young. Fabio began to hurt her. She bled and her vulva probably tore. Several times. The first few times, the wounds healed on their own. But one day Inés had a fever all day. He left her in bed and went to the countryside. When he returned, he found her naked, sweating, and shivering. He carried her and took her to Dr. Farías.

That night, the doctor put his arm around Fabio's shoulders and led him to the patio of his office. He was smoking, and blowing smoke in his face, he said...

-Hold on a minute, buddy.

It goes without saying that he couldn't do anything. The town and its inhabitants were shrouded in a veil of secrecy, beneath which all the privileges coexisted. Secrecy is rarely torn, and if it is, it's at the expense of a meticulousness resistant to all corruption. No one could cast the first stone, and that's what Farías thought at that moment. It wasn't the first time he'd seen this, nor was it the most serious, but each time he thought the same thing.

Fabio sat down and covered his face with his hands. He wasn't crying.

- Why don't you help me?
- What are you thinking about, Funes, in those moments?
-I don't know, it's just how I feel.
- And what do you feel, besides pleasure, you son of a bitch?
- I don't want to, I know it's wrong, but I can't help it.
-That's psychologist nonsense, Funes, someone put it in your head.
Funes thought, digging into his feelings with the scalpel of thought.
-I'll clean it, doctor.
"That's what I thought, Funes. Why do you think the world is labeled as sexist and patriarchal, and why are we criticized so much? Semen, Funes, creates life. Women contribute their part, of course; they provide the home, that vast space for just one of us to live in, alone. We live inside them, always, and we clean the house they neglect. The whiteness of semen is like the whiteness of a wedding dress."
He stopped to look at the sky in the quiet corner of the street at two in the morning. Inés was sleeping on the examination table in Farías's private office, with less fever and greater serenity.
"One prick, my friend, is enough to stain all that red. Don't ask me why we do it; it's the essence of our nature, perhaps. Malice? I don't know. Despite all our intellect, we men are animals, Funes, and against that, wisdom isn't enough, not even the wisdom of a philosopher, nor the selflessness of a saint. Why do you think those poor devils in cassocks flagellate themselves so much? Father Maccabee seems to have found the right balance to have a clear conscience."
"What was that bumpkin Funes going to understand!" he thought. That night the father left with his daughter in his arms and a small bag of medicine.

For the next three years, there were austere times and stormy ones. Farías took care of everything. At times, he would have chosen to take Inés to the hospital, but it was unthinkable. One day in December, she nearly died. It wouldn't have been the first time, and Fabio kept vigil beside his daughter, holding her hand, weeping into the palm of the girl who was now fifteen. Naked in bed, she was covered in scars on her thighs and pelvis, and her vulva was a kind of crust, hard yet soft to the touch, like an oyster, precisely. Inés had changed somewhat in her appearance. She wasn't

entirely ugly now, and her hair had curled naturally, and was dark and shiny like jet.
Twice, maybe three times, she had had abortions. But this time Farías had to take care of it himself. Inés no longer had a healthy uterus, and any embryo that implanted wouldn't be able to attach and would die, and she would get an infection. When Funes took her to Farías that December, she was two months pregnant. She hadn't realized it or hadn't wanted to say anything. Inés had settled into that kind of emotionless equilibrium, that golden peace so like God, that accepted everything, both life and death. There was no possibility of change because there were no alternatives.
The embryo had become lodged near an ovary, like one more of those protective scar layers her body had learned to form, a kind of armor, the internal shell of the beetle her uterus had become. Digging through those tissues was brutal and difficult for Farías, but he was finally able to extract the dead embryo. The infection, however, did not stop, and until the beginning of the new year, Inés remained in her bed at the ranch. Fabio kept vigil; he no longer worked, and food was scarce. Farías got her medicine at Valverde's pharmacy in La Plata, the only one he could deal with without fear.
"He's dying, isn't he?" Fabio asked, looking up, without taking his hands off the ground as he prayed.
-Nothing is certain, Funes.
On January 5th, the fever broke. Inés opened her eyes and saw her father with his head on the bed, his beard several days' growth, his shirt damp with sweat. With one hand, she stroked his curly hair, from which he had inherited her own. Fabio woke up startled.
- Oh my God! Oh my God!
He hugged her and kissed her until it hurt, because he didn't know any other way.
Farías breathed a sigh of relief.
-You can take it home this afternoon.
Funes, however, lowered his head, thinking about something, as if trying to remember.
-I have to do something first, doctor.
He hugged Farías, squeezed Inés in his arms again, who was laughing. And went out into the street.

He went straight to the church. Father Macabeo was saying seven o'clock mass. He waited until it was over and approached him when he had finished greeting the swarm of mothers and daughters crowding around him.
- Will you hear my confession, Father?
Maccabee entered the confessional in his white chasuble, and Fabio knelt on the other side. They were separated by the wickerwork woven by the Indians more than 150 years before.
-I have sinned, Father.
- How long has it been since you went to confession, son?
-Since I was little, Father.
Then began the long litany of crimes and sins, which he recited with interruptions, coughs, and excessive whimpering that bored the priest.
-That's enough, son. I absolve you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Funes was left waiting.
- And what is my penance, Father?
- You already know, that's why you came.
The next day, Farías sent for him to take Inés home, since he hadn't appeared all day or night. They found him in the Sanhueza field, under the threshing machine. His body, or what was left of it at least, was mangled and in pieces scattered around the machine. "How did this happen?" the justice of the peace asked the doctor.
"He probably turned on the machine and fell asleep," he replied. "His little girl was sick, and he kept vigil over her for many sleepless days."
"Highly commendable," said the judge, and closed the case as a regrettable accident.
Farías, however, staring at Fabio Funes's riddled body, imagined the gruesome scene of suicide. Climbing into the engine cab, starting it, and then suddenly jumping out in front of it. It took immense courage for that, the last vestiges of a tormented soul.

"What are we going to do with you?" Farías said, looking at the girl in the mourning clothes the funeral home owner had lent her, clothes that were too big for her. With her hands in her suit pockets and a crumpled piece of

paper on which she had written a few words of farewell to Funes, she gazed at her standing there in the cemetery, in front of the cross.
"I can stay with you, doctor. I'd be your nurse... I can learn and do everything... you'll see..."
There was no doubt about it, he told himself. If he abandoned her to the state, they would take her to an orphanage, and she would come out worse than when she went in. He thought about it for a while. He loosened his tie and wiped his forehead. The hat made him warm, but it protected him from the sun on the cemetery. The dead didn't complain, and he envied them.
-Okay, but you have to go to school and finish it. Without that, you'll go to the orphanage.
She promised she would, and she did it very well. She was intelligent and diligent. She took great care in exploring the books Farías had at his house and office, and she also bought him more each time she went to Buenos Aires. During the years she lived with him until she finished school, she got into his bed several times, but he would tell her:
-Get out of here...
-But Dad let me...
"I'm not your dad. You'll realize that when you have a husband..."
- And don't you want to be one?
The doctor laughed.
"They'd arrest me, Inesita. Go on, get back to your bed..."—and then he pushed her affectionately, but firmly.
At eighteen, she had finished school with good grades. Anyone who saw her now wouldn't recognize the disheveled, dirty girl who had worked in the fields. She assisted the doctor as a nurse, unfazed by the blood or the patients' cries of pain. He had asked her if she wanted to study to be a nurse or a doctor; she had the temperament for it, after all. She shrugged.
"I just want to stay with you," she said.
Yes, the obsession hadn't ended. He enrolled her in the Teachers' Lyceum, and she did as she did everything, with care and effort, as if she enjoyed it, and yet, she seemed to simply obey an automatism that made her follow the rules imposed by the man who was above her.
He didn't live to see her finish the course or graduate as a teacher. Dr. Hermes Farías died one winter amidst the ravages that syphilis had

wrought on his bones. He had contracted it thirty years earlier from an Indian prostitute in Brazil.
But he never touched Inés. The doctor knew what he was doing.

2

She began working in provincial schools as a substitute teacher for almost a year, then received an appointment as a fifth-grade teacher in a school in La Plata. She was twenty-two years old, and when she first walked through that metal gate, which looked more like a shed or workshop than a school, she didn't know she would spend most of her days there. She became part of that school's history, contributing ideas, physical effort, and much of her health, which she would lose forever. And above all, it was where the dreams of love she had believed existed only in books had taken root.
But the first few years weren't easy. She was extremely strict with her students. The children didn't like her, and their parents complained to the headmistress about the despotic way the children said she treated them. She was tall, with thick, black hair, neatly tied back in a bun with multiple clips. She never wore makeup, at least not back then. Her complexion was very pale, and her eyes were very dark. Her eyebrows were thin, and her face was straight. Only her wide hips and the way her dresses or skirts billowed as she walked across the courtyard, especially in the winter gusts, when she went from classroom to classroom, supervising, talking with the other teachers. Over her dress, she wore a smock, and also the Montgomery coat that Dr. Farías had given her.
Her colleagues didn't much care for her either, due to her austere, dry, even authoritarian nature. But she didn't see herself that way; it was simply how she had learned to act with others, based on how she had been treated. From the rejection of her childhood and adolescence, she had acquired the necessary austerity and distance. She remained in her limbo, the one in which she had found refuge at the beginning of her secret, the one she had shared with her father. Although he was gone and the life she had led with him was over, that room in her mind remained open, warmed

by a dream kept moist by who knows what secretions of the soul. If her body felt the aftereffects of what had happened to her every day, if her mind insisted on constantly demanding and denouncing all those nights that the well-thinking common good called execrable, she had no choice but to take refuge in that room, which she could open wherever she was: the dining room or the patio of her house, the teachers' room or the classroom of the school, or on the bus that took her wherever she was going.

She was transferred from grade to grade several times because of complaints. She would silently leave the principal's office and take her new class. She got along better with the older boys. That personality, bordering on force, just a step away from violence, would bristle with the twelve- or thirteen-year-old boys, and they would respond, and in a curious and extraordinary way for that time, they would somehow end up reconciling themselves in bitterness rather than sentimentality. And it was in this way that the classes she taught and the grades she was in charge of were the ones that had the best grades at the end of the year. And the old-school principal had to acknowledge that Inés Funes was a born teacher. What is that, and where does it come from? From any part of the personality; it can be from a vocation, a love for teaching or a particular subject, a love for children, or the fulfillment of finding in others an understanding of one's own wisdom. Everything is selfish, even love; the headmistress, an old spinster, knew this well. But Inés employed a different kind of wisdom: challenge, demand, and harshness. And the boys of that age, accustomed to the realities of their families—unstable, violent, and promiscuous—were surely excited to find in this schoolteacher an opponent of equal or greater strength. She was a constant ebb and flow of insistence and rebukes that only served to provoke their rebellion. A few days or several months of resistance were nothing when, in the end, the boys awoke, and suddenly, a convoluted and twisted equation, or a poetic or philosophical phrase, allowed itself to be dissected to reveal its secrets to those new minds, astonished for the first and only time, until the next discovery.

She organized the December school fairs to raise funds for the following year, which were used to renovate the school. The sheet metal gate was replaced with a good wooden one, the front was painted, the courtyard was tiled, books were bought for the library—which didn't exist when she

arrived—and maps were obtained for geography classes. She hung these maps from a hook above the blackboard and then unfolded them, much to the children's fascination. After allowing this brief display of sentimentality, she silenced them with two taps of the eraser. She even managed to acquire a skeleton, but since it was too expensive, she went to the cemetery's ossuary to get one, cleaned it, assembled it, and painted it. A year later, an inspector discovered its origin, and she received a reprimand that nearly resulted in her expulsion, but the principal intervened on her behalf. This was a year before the old woman retired, and as a consequence of that incident, she was ruled out as a successor for the position, which had been discussed for some time.

But one day, Miss Inés began to change. The brief daydreams that students would occasionally catch her in during class, gazing out the window while they did their homework at their desks, or that her colleagues would notice when they entered the teachers' lounge and saw her with one elbow on the table and her chin resting on her palm, became more frequent and prolonged. She would shake off these moments as if dusting herself off an old piece of furniture, and, surprisingly, she would apologize and even smile. At first, they let it go, dismissing it as the distractions of a hard, austere soul that could also tire. During those last five years, they had learned not to fight Miss Inés. Those who didn't loathe her had come to respect her, and many didn't even dare admit to a certain stubborn admiration. Who would want to be like her? No one, of course.

She knew she was forever sterile, that she could never have children. Perhaps that's why she didn't like small children. With older ones, on the other hand, she engaged them in a way that was spontaneous and without preamble or prior permission, like a fierce struggle that arose naturally because each participant had found their suitable opponent. The boys awakening to sex, without yet fully understanding what it was all about, imagining more than they had seen or heard, didn't see her as a woman, but as a kind of confidante with whom they couldn't speak as they would with a man, but from whom they could learn intuitively. Amidst the hostilities, the attraction between the sexes was implicit, but so was a wisdom that flowed through underlying channels.

She had periods, sometimes, because one of her ovaries still functioned reluctantly, as she liked to think. That was all that was left of her as a

woman, she told herself. She had urinary tract infections very frequently; the scars from the abortions and perineal tears were almost numb to the touch and retained urine and bacteria. Daily hygiene was a real problem every morning, not because of the pain, but because of its absence. Any day, when she undressed, she might discover a stain that hadn't been there the day before. That's why she went regularly for checkups and examinations with Dr. Ruiz. She didn't know anyone in La Plata, and Farías had died as if he were the only doctor in the world. Adalberto Ruiz, however, was a down-to-earth man who, nevertheless, didn't make bad jokes or joke about women's sexuality. The first time he examined her, he saw her naked from the waist down on the examination table, and he had to apologize for his brief awkwardness, which she hadn't even noticed. She didn't ask him anything; it wasn't necessary. From then on, she visited him regularly, and they spoke frankly about what had happened. The best thing she found in Ruiz, according to her, wasn't so much his knowledge, but his discretion.

It was during one of these consultations that she met Bruno Méndez. Ruiz, a general practitioner, saw patients of all kinds. There weren't many doctors in the area, and over time, thanks to his down-to-earth nature, he absorbed the clientele of several others who tried to set up shop nearby. He even had patients who were wealthy and could afford to be treated in Buenos Aires at the best clinics. Méndez was one of them. But Méndez was from the area; he had spent most of his childhood between Buenos Aires and La Plata, traveling back and forth by train and later by car, until he opened his workshop in the latter city. Shortly afterward, he had the accident that resulted in the amputation of his leg. And so, with a prosthetic leg—hard, though not quite as hard as a wooden leg—Inés met him, entering the office with his unmistakable, noisy gait. First, his good leg, and then the other pair of shoes, which, despite having the same sole, clattered on the floor like a brick dropped from a great height. In the doctor's waiting room, everyone turned around when he entered, but since he was so well-known, they soon became distracted or greeted him, depending on the situation. The only one who didn't notice was Inés, who stared at him with her hands in her skirt, wringing a handkerchief she was using to blow her nose because of her cold.

It was winter, and Méndez had come in wearing a hand-knitted scarf and a very fine camel-hair overcoat. He sat down next to her in the only empty chair. He greeted her politely, removing his hat and then his overcoat, which he placed on his knees. His left thigh was that of a strong man, but below the knee, his trousers hung loosely down to his shoe. She couldn't see the prosthesis that day, but she glanced at Bruno's face and was surprised to find him watching her with a smile she found charming.
“Excuse me,” she said. Why had she said that? Weren’t all those silly words about courtesy and kindness just a load of nonsense she’d learned in high school? Yet he had smiled at her while she called him a cripple, and yet that smile wasn’t contemptuous. It was something like, she told herself, watching one of her students when they both laughed at the absurdity of it all, out of exhaustion after a long battle of words and chalk in class.
Bruno Méndez was her height; their gazes met exactly. He had very dark blue eyes, like the Atlantic, dark brown hair, a scruffy beard, and a broad forehead. His hairy neck dipped beneath the collar of his white shirt with a black tie.
"There's no need, miss," he replied. "Are you a new patient of the doctor's?"
-No, it's been a while, but we haven't crossed paths, sir…
He told her his name, and she told him hers.
"I come every few months, when my stump hurts, to get it padded. My prosthesis breaks and I have to replace it, and it costs a fortune. And I don't want them to take anything else from me."
Nobody laughed, because everyone else was listening, of course. He repeated the same thing every time.
-Excuse me, bad joke.
-Don't worry, I'm used to it, because of the boys…
-Ah, how many do you have, if I may ask?
Inés was neither embarrassed nor flustered when she had been asked the same thing so many times before, especially by women.
-I say this for my students; I am a teacher.
That afternoon they were the last to be seen. Everyone came and went from the doctor's office until it was almost dark, and the nurse turned on the lights. They seemed forgotten in that corner where they occupied two chairs surrounded by emptiness. They talked, laughed, sometimes whispered like old friends. What did they talk about? Their illnesses, of

course, the things people always talk about in a doctor's office, but neither of them spoke very deeply about it, more like they talk about the weather. They talked about the country, the economic situation, the world in general. She told him a little about school, he about his mechanic shop. Méndez had large, strong hands , with scars and hardened skin, but somehow they were attractive. She thought of her father's hands, similar in the marks of experience.
Then the doctor appeared in the doorway of the office and called her. Inés stood up, unsure how to say goodbye to Méndez. He spared her the uncertainty when he said:
-We'll see each other one of these days, Miss Inés.
-With pleasure, Bruno.
They shook hands gently. Anyone who had known her for a while wouldn't have recognized her from her words or expression when she entered the office.

For those who wanted to create a melodrama of betrayed love, Inés didn't find out Bruno was married until it was too late, but it's unlikely she didn't know from the start. If he didn't tell her himself, there were always plenty of others who made sure she did. Méndez was well-known in the neighborhood and beyond, practically throughout the city, when they first met. If at first it was because of the kindness of his work, it soon spread as a consequence of the accident, which turned him into almost a martyr for a time. "Poor thing," said the wives of those who had brought their cars in for repairs, and the neighbors, and so the legend of Juan the local hospitable man spread like wildfire. Because it just so happened that poor Bruno, from a troubled family, so broken that it wasn't in his nature to fix them, lost his left leg under the weight of a pickup truck engine that the old tow truck he had bought secondhand couldn't support. They blamed not the reseller, but the bank that refused to grant him credit, and also the loan to pay for the prosthesis, and the press took care of spreading the rumors in the appropriate way. But since it was a suburban story, it soon faded into oblivion, although locally it transformed into a carefully embellished myth, protected like a relic. This was certainly aided by the fame Bruno acquired when, alone, with his stump still stitched up, he doubled his working hours to earn money. He had a wife and two very young children, one a newborn

and the other a year old. The poor man was finished, everyone said, and yet he repaired anything brought to him that he could hold in his wheelchair, and later in his workshop, by then empty of cars. The local newspaper then came to interview him, and his work increased accordingly.

By the time they met, Bruno's children were already teenagers, and his workshop had several branches in La Plata and another in Temperley. He was also doing well, thanks to the house he'd bought and the cars he'd given his children. The boys turned out to be a bit of a freeloader, but that's another story. The point is, everyone knew he hadn't achieved this lifestyle by repairing cars or through the pity his personal tragedy evoked, even though many insisted on seeing him almost like a saintly figure, perched on one leg and leaning on a car engine. They even made calendars with that image, which is probably still plastered on the wall of some old, abandoned workshop. It was at the same time that this legend was being forged that people learned about the businesses Bruno was hiding up his sleeve, which were no longer his greasy overalls but a camel-hair overcoat. The junkyard business, of course; that's what it was all about. But one couldn't tarnish an apostolate, a candidate for sainthood, a devoted husband and father whose children were already becoming ungrateful. The thousands of pesos mentioned in the press were surely an understatement, because money came and went as fast as trucks could travel from city to city in the province. General Justo had taken power at that time, and the economic resurgence was embodied by the success of a simple auto mechanic. If he could do it… was the phrase tacitly inscribed in the collective consciousness of the suburbs. The people's times were coming of age, and soon they would reach maturity.

They started seeing each other. At first, they went to places far from their workplaces. Those who had seen them in the doctor's office weren't surprised at all; all that was missing were the cuddles and kisses to seal the deal. But they pretended not to notice what others were saying, and they would go to some café in the afternoons, when she got out of school, or to some dive bar on poorly numbered streets in the outskirts of town, where the damp cold gave Inés goosebumps, and the downpour was dangerous for Bruno's unsteady steps. Both, however, arrived punctually for their dates, and they stayed until very late. That's why no one believed she didn't

know he was married, because he still lived with his wife, and somehow he had to justify those outings and late arrivals.
That's what they talked about, perhaps, one night, at eleven or later. She was half-shivering, he was beside her, embracing her and sharing the anise she liked so much. The first time he let her taste it, she looked at him, ecstatic, as if she had tasted an elixir.
"Do you have to leave?" he asked her.
He shrugged.
-You know, I don't want any scenes at this hour.
-And what do you do when you arrive?
-He's asleep, or pretending to be asleep. I'll lie down next to him and that's it...
That's how the dialogues ended when it came to the "other woman," no name at the beginning, no feelings.
It was all business, he'd say at home. Untimely meetings, now hidden by the police, who, despite everything, always try to give the appearance of doing something. His wife knew it, of course; after all, she'd helped build the financial empire with Bruno and the cars. Inés had imagined her hundreds of times: blonde, brunette, redhead, fat, thin, bad, good, stupid, and she could never quite get the right description because he never wanted to say more than two words about her. Inés avoided places where the other woman might go, but when she was told that she'd gone to Buenos Aires and was taking one of their children, she felt, for the first time, free of all hypocrisy.
He called her to the workshop in the middle of the morning, while she was still at school.
-Come here, I have something important to tell you, it's a surprise.
He made excuses; he didn't like being seen there. She didn't understand, and yet she waited all afternoon, until it was almost dark. The teachers left, and they were surprised that she, now so different and sociable, was left almost alone at the school, except for the janitor and his dog. Inés waited in the teachers' lounge and heard Bruno's disjointed footsteps. She suddenly imagined the footsteps of a criminal arriving at the end of the afternoon, perhaps with a scythe or a sickle in his hands. What nonsense, she told herself, when she saw him appear in the doorway of the teachers' lounge,

framed almost by the drawings of the children who had won prizes or by the school diagrams. She got up to hug him, and they kissed.
"What's wrong, my love?" he asked her, amidst the kisses.
-I miss you, Bruno.
-And you desire me, too?
- A lot.
-So much so that in the end you left me…?
Without letting go, he stretched out an arm, dropped his hat, turned off the light switch by the frame, and pushed her onto the table. Inés resisted, suddenly frightened.
"And you called me for this?" he said. It was the first time he'd heard insolence in her voice. He was aroused, and it was her fault. She hadn't taken care of the proper details.
-Forgive me, I'm too happy, and I got carried away.
-I understand. Do you want to come over to my house tonight?
-And your other son?
-Oscar, that rascal, doesn't have a fixed place; now he's with his uncle, I think, or pretending to work in a bakery.
They got into the car, newly bought, if she could still smell the new upholstery. She liked it, of course, but it wasn't the money that attracted her, nor did she care that they weren't a good match. She desired Bruno, but she was afraid of what would happen when he saw her naked.
As they were driving in the middle of the night, she said:
"I know I'm not very pretty, Bruno. You might be disappointed."
Don't come at me with that, you know I love you…
"I know, otherwise you wouldn't waste your time with a little teacher like me, but you could have prettier women, and I'm afraid you'll get tired of it..."
-Let me take care of that in due time, if it comes.
It was a typical Fabio Funes response, Inés thought.
They stopped at a corner, in front of the house. An old house that Dardo Rocha himself might have designed, judging by its appearance and the symmetry of its forms. They entered without pausing in the darkened rooms, which he thought he could make out to be the vestibule, barely illuminated by the frosted glass on either side of the door, or the dining room where the large table was an immense shadow , and the living room

where the hearth offered cold embers like stars in a fallen sky. They went upstairs to a room that was certainly not the couple's. It was cold, the walls bare, the meager lamp hanging from the ceiling. It was a lifeless room, where the wooden floor offered no warmth because the windows had no character, there were no curtains, the panes showed signs of weak licks from dirty cloths, and the sloping ceiling, instead of providing shelter, looked like nothing more than a leaning wall about to collapse.
But it didn't matter; she only had eyes for Bruno's shoulders. He'd taken off his shirt, revealing the muscles of a man in his early thirties, used to lifting heavy tools. She hugged him then, placing her hands on his firm, hairy back, and suddenly realized he'd removed his prosthesis along with his trousers, and was staggering.
"I'll hold you up, my love," she said, because she sensed his vulnerability. Bruno was holding onto Inés with almost all his weight, and to her he was nothing, a simple flower of raw and slender love, half wild, grown among the weeds of a vacant lot in the neighborhood next to a shed that had successively served as a mechanic's workshop, a storage facility, or a simple nest of emptiness.
Then she wasn't afraid. She took off her clothes while he held onto her, kissing her neck and shoulders, and then her breasts. She helped him onto the bed, and suddenly she fell onto her good knee next to the mattress, her face right at Inés's bare crotch. They laughed, but then he began to caress her with his lips.
And it stopped.
-It seems like the past is determined to screw us over, isn't it?
He looked at her from that immense distance that was wonder, or questioning.
-That's right, Bruno. We're made for each other.
He gave a dismissive, brusque, incredulous start.
Don't come at me with that nonsense. We're survivors, nothing more.
Yes, he was right, that's more dignified than sentimentality. Because how many men and women would be like them, in a dead room, moving their bodies like those wooden figures a psychologist uses to test a patient's dexterity? They, different from everyone else, and from each other. Their incongruous bodies looked at each other, smelled each other, mentally

tested each other. And it was no use, the combinations were asymmetrical and forced.
But it didn't matter.
Bruno's torso was strong enough in his arms to lift her onto the bed and slide her down onto the pillows. Inés's body had the hardness of bark, yet also its suppleness. He liked that wounded skin, where each scar was a crease that whispered a secret. He pressed his ear to hers and smiled. She couldn't see his face, but his beard tickled her, and it was the first time in a long time that she hadn't felt such a sensation. So she stretched out her arms and desperately slid her hands down Bruno's back, until she touched his buttocks, and saw, in the slanted mirror of the ceiling, imagined by her, the shape of the incomplete body of this man who was the most complete she had ever seen. The asymmetry was the symmetry of his contours projected onto hers. Inés's wide pelvis protected him, and it was there that he took refuge, like a boy both ashamed and doomed, because he had been condemned since childhood to see the halves of men: his father, for example, the half-man who lived in a wheelchair pulled by the other half-father who wasn't his father.
That's what he spoke to her about that night, between gasps and closed eyes, with the voice that came from his unkempt beard but which she had learned to kiss like someone who abandons themselves to be raked by a plow of barbed wire.
The pain was so intense that both suffered it. The pain of their faces being touched and kissed, the pain of their bodies being penetrated and penetrating each other.
Open scars and shapeless stumps.
The inheritance of the bodies was the only thing they had as their own, and they handed it over that night, confidently, like someone sharing for the first time the stigma of their soul without shame.
Lying naked, in the dead of night, as the sun rose and peeked through the window like a curious neighbor, they spoke of their parents. How could they compare them when they shared the same difference, and what set them apart was the equality of their character? Then, as the conversation turned, God appeared. They looked into each other's eyes, truly startled by the coincidence, perhaps the only real resemblance they found that night.

The God of their parents were gods with the same name, and above all, the same guilt. Too tall, their feet walked on puddles. That's why their elders were always stumbling, one rolling in a wheelchair, like Bruno's, the other zigzagging over the stones in the field, like Inés's.
"But your leg, Bruno, wasn't your old man's fault. Mine, on the other hand, look what he did to me."
There was already plenty of light in the room. There was no way to fake concealment, not even with the sheets.
"My old man," he said, "poor fellow, he made me in his own image. He amputated his own leg, you know. That's how I knew him. I never had any other god than that one who lived in a wheelchair."
Inés lit a cigarette, something she rarely did. Was she happy in her unhappiness? she wondered. What was Bruno feeling? Love? Frustration? Or just another bed-in? Looking at the dry stump of his leg that ended in a kind of pointed bone covered in parchment-like, hardened skin, she knew that he only considered himself a man when he was doing good business. She had seen it when they talked about the small auto parts business that was growing and expanding.

Once they were dressed, they talked about business as if discussing the day's shopping and the people they'd met on the street. From the pranks of Inés's students, the personalities of one or the audacity of another, they moved on to talking about bolts, spark plugs, and brake fluid, which to Inés's ears sounded like pieces of an extraordinary, marvelous assembly, full of secrets she deciphered through her own perceptiveness. Fabio Funes's old pickup truck, the one he'd bought shortly before killing himself, was an orchestra of strange noises and a makeshift mechanic.
And while she listened to him talk about the prices of spare parts, the rising costs, the headaches the government was recently causing him, she watched him from across the table in a kitchen that wasn't her own. And yet, that table was a bridge that transcended real spaces and invented others.
"You know, Inés? I'm worried that everything will fall apart..."
Then she got up from her chair, stood beside him, made him put down the mate that was his only breakfast that morning, and hugged him so tightly as if she wanted to hold not only his body, and with it the entire structure of business and enterprise upon which Bruno founded his soul, but also,

and precisely, the very soul of that man who, she already knew, was an impregnable bastion in her life, and who, as such and as a man, could only be brought down by knocking him down or killing him. Poor, deluded Inés, in that infatuation of flesh and soul, didn't realize that she was speaking of the same thing, like a fortune teller, even against her will.

3

The bad times arrived, those of economic crises. But which ones, if every decade has had its share? One could almost say it's a chronic state for the country. However, they came after a prosperous decade, when we were considered the breadbasket of the world, and the English bought beef from us in large quantities, except for sheep, which the Argentine man perhaps considered a weakness, and because the English farms raised them with much better skill and expertise. That's why we exported raw materials and then bought the finished products back at three times the cost. The mentality of the wise man—whether from Buenos Aires, a Creole, or Spanish, what does it matter—deceived us like a devil whispering in our ears, breathing down our necks with an acrid breath that rotted our brains. And how to replace them? With Ford technology, of course. Machinery and smoke is the postcard of our pampas that tourists send to their relatives abroad. Behind the photo, some words of affection, and in the middle: the yellowed cardboard.
Bruno had partners in his company : Talleres SRL. Just like that, to avoid confusion. Inés had seen them a couple of times when she passed by the workshop where she had the accident. The main one was named Benítez, but Bruno had told her that he only put up money, since he was practically a tycoon with his paper mills all along the coast and in northern Buenos Aires. Benítez wore a suit and drove a station wagon he had brought from the United States. The other one, however, a short, stocky, bearded man, with a cigarette always dangling from the left corner of his mouth, was Rinaldi, a kind of mobster, that's what Bruno called him, because he was

brutish and opportunistic, shady like a string of lies, but necessary in those shady dealings where he had to contend with the usual turncoats.
Car parts, Bruno would sometimes say, are a real headache.
That was enough for Inés. The essential thing was being by his side in the car and in bed. They no longer hid their relationship, because he was practically separated from his wife. Bruno would pick her up from school, and she would get up, gather her books when he was announced to her or when she heard the unmistakable sound of his footsteps, and brazenly greet the other teachers, who were clearly envious.
The newspaper headlines were alarmist. The crisis was compared to the Wall Street crash more than a decade earlier. What the newspapers didn't mention were the plans to bring Perón back, but that was the crux of the matter. The government was exploiting the crisis to its advantage, blaming it on the opposition, and the opposition was using it as a pretext for revolution.
"Benítez says the general is not good for us," Bruno said in the car, on the afternoon of May 25th after the school events that were so tiring for Inés.
"I don't know, Bruno. I see the kids as scruffy. Many of the parents lost their jobs."
-So what, Inesita? The socialists fill their mouths with shit and spit it out, and they call that talking about reality.
-I don't know, Bruno.
He, cursing profusely at the driver of other cars and a couple of pedestrians, said:
The worst part is that they're killing us. And we have to do something, otherwise we'll go bankrupt.
-Do you think it's that big of a deal, Bruno?
"Do the math, Inés. The suppliers are holding back, waiting to see what will happen. Maybe, with luck, nothing will happen, but in the meantime, what do we do?"
Time passed, and the end of the year arrived. Bruno was increasingly worried. He neglected his prosthesis, which had cracked, and said that ordering another one from Europe was too expensive. He paced back and forth across the room, and the sound of his footsteps grew even stranger. The shoe with the prosthesis squeaked, mimicking the sound of a door slamming and unslamming on its hinges. This infuriated her when she tried

to concentrate on grading the tests she took home or to Bruno's. She knew the car like the back of her hand; they had spent so many times lying in the back seat kissing, atop the children's folders she carried from one house to the other. She couldn't move out yet, not until the divorce was finalized, not in the country, of course, but everything was in the hands of some American lawyers who were charging a fortune. When he told her he'd had to postpone the proceedings for a while, her heart sank, and she glared at him.

-What do you think, that they're just giving me money for free? Go to hell…

Bruno didn't usually talk like that; Bruno was a gentleman. Then, over the following week, she noticed him arriving late, smelling strongly of tobacco. He met with Benítez and Rinaldi, and probably a few others, about business. They weren't talking about paper pulp or spare parts, that was for sure; the topic had run its course. The occasional article about the "Benítez Paper Mill" made it clear it was going to declare bankruptcy. But Bruno had the knowledge in his head; he was like a doctor, able to apply his expertise anywhere, in any neighborhood or city where there were cars —and where there weren't?

But Bruno was suffering; he was so accustomed to the nouveau riche *status quo* that the thought of getting his hands on an engine again felt like an abyss. That's what he said, but the truth was that his wife was asking him for money, and so were the lawyers. Inés was afraid he was going to leave her.

"I'll help you," Inés said candidly while they ate at home, because they no longer went out.

"With your teacher's salary, Inesita?" he replied, slurping his soup noisily, quite deliberately to emphasize the sarcasm. His face was more bitter than gall.

Then the news of the robbery broke. A finance company in Partido de la Costa had been robbed. At first, no one paid it any mind, considering it was a place that offered loans to workers and retirees in a rented 2 x 5 meter space, and at an interest rate even higher than the banks'. Pure loan sharks, it was obvious. But then it was said that it was a front for more shady dealings. That was the least compromising term the press could find to imply what every intelligent citizen already knew. The thing is, all hell broke loose when the amount of the loot was leaked: 16 million pesos.

Impossible for a finance company of that caliber, a tacit permission began to spread to talk about what was usually hidden. The chop shops were the subject of controversy, and the smokescreen, of course. The money had to come from somewhere, and if it came in under the customs desk, it had to pretend, too, to have come from illicit activity. The owners of the finance company, with their sham surnames, and a leaked photo in the press—perhaps of any man with a mustache—were prosecuted and imprisoned, or so they said. Where were they? Who could know? And the money? In the hands of the thieves. Heeding popular wisdom, which foreign interests had skillfully imitated and exploited, the thieves enjoyed the people's amnesty, and for that, the hands of the courts and the police were sufficiently bribed.
What happened immediately after the robbery was very fast, a matter of three days, perhaps. While the news was being published, Bruno was nervous. He called Inés at school every half hour, and when they met in the afternoon, he insisted it be at her house. Inés had grown too accustomed, perhaps, to Bruno's large house. She was convinced that sooner or later she would move out and that she wouldn't have to hide her head or put on a show anymore. When Bruno got his divorce, of course.
That afternoon, after having read the entire midday edition of *La Prensa , he began to wander around the small kitchen, with his hands in his pockets or smoking one cigarette after another.*
"What's wrong?" she asked him, but he just gave her confused, mostly contemptuous, looks. Women don't understand these things, she could read in his eyes. Fine, as long as he loved her like he had these last few months, and never left her, that was enough for her. It was all that mattered, really.
Only the following afternoon, as dusk was falling and the last vestiges of sunlight escaped through the slats of the lowered blinds in the room, did he tell her what he had been mulling over. They were in bed, he in his white underpants, she in her black petticoat, one breast exposed because of a broken strap. How she loved it when he kissed her nipple so delicately, as he always did, like a nursing infant but with large hands, and then his body straddled her, and then between him and the bed she was not a piece of scarred flesh, but nothingness, a mere spirit capable of all sensations. She had come to the conclusion, after so much time spent delving into her psyche, her soul, or that hard, suffering brain into which her womb had transformed, that it wasn't her body that mattered, but Bruno's. Without

him, she was nothing more than a teacher without vocation or even any enjoyment of what she did. Pouring words into the children's ears was easy; the hard part was keeping them from overflowing from those skulls, and then he'd get angry because he couldn't expand those tiny, fragile vessels. How he would have loved to smash them with a hammer and knead them back together bigger, or not even that, just leave the fragments for the parents to come and collect. "Mr. and Mrs. X, please pick up your son from school today; he's cracked his head." How he laughed at that idea, so funny.

-Inesita, I have to ask you a very big favor.

-Whatever you want, Bruno.

Inés's face lit up, but it shifted through different states as she listened to Bruno's story. He was telling her everything, almost in detail, emphasizing the motives, or rather, the excuses. The planning of the robbery, the four partners he hadn't named, and his own responsibility: the temporary treasurer of the ill-gotten gains. His partners trusted him, Inesita; they had placed their effort and hope, or rather their desperation, in his hands. He had to hide the money, Inés, in a safe place, where the police wouldn't even think to look.

"Then I thought," he said , placing the palm of his hand on Inés's belly, like the protective hand of God on her body, now hard and lifeless, "what better place than school? It won't be for long, not until things calm down. You have no idea, my dear, what a favor you would be doing me. I know I'm asking a lot, that I'm going against your values, my love, but you know I love you madly."

She looked at him, assuming the words were just that, but she also saw the desperation in Bruno's face. She sensed he intended to keep everything for himself, and in that trace of guilt he couldn't escape despite his best efforts to suppress remorse, she saw the face of her father, Fabio Funes, begging God for forgiveness even as he sinned.

In this case, Inés was the priestess of Bruno Méndez.

The one who would keep the secret of her confession hidden for the rest of her life.

The next day, at ten o'clock at night, when the neighborhood was dark and the school janitor had left for home on the nine o'clock bus, she entered with the copy of the key she had long ago requested to enter one New

Year's Eve to set up the tables for the school fair. They walked in silence down the hallway and past the empty classrooms. The posters and drawings on the walls stood out white like pale stains, awakening at Bruno's dry, crooked steps as he carried the heavy suitcase under one arm. They reached a door at the end of the hallway, which led to a small courtyard used for cleaning supplies or dumping old things. A meter further on, there was another door, for which only she had the key. So much time had passed that the others had forgotten the minor inconvenience Inés had had with the skeleton her meticulous care had provided. The skeleton was still there, wrapped in dirty cloths.
"Here?" Bruno asked.
-Nobody's looking here, and whoever does will ask for the key.
Bruno hesitated, but in the end he left the old suitcase, which didn't weigh that much; the bills and bundles were many, but they were simply paper.
Time passed. They went about their daily routines: school and the workshop. They met at Inés's house, a small house at the end of a long, chilly alleyway that tried to defend itself against the vacant lot and garbage on the other side. There were hardly any neighbors; the property was in litigation, which is why Inés paid very little rent. They met, made love, talked about the "dead man," and laughed. But it was time to awaken the corpse, he said, lying naked on the bed, smoking. Ash fell onto his belly, the belly of a man in his thirties who tried in vain to take care of himself, mingling with his thick, brown hair.
-Well, Bruno, tell me…
-I'll tell you, Inesita.
He crushed the joint in the ashtray on the bedside table and reached for his member, flaccid now, but which he wanted to give work to.
She thought about the night and the knocks, the honking in the dark neighborhood, and the headlights of a car briefly illuminating the blinds. All those things that had happened from time to time in recent months. Who were they? she had asked Bruno. Without answering, he simply calmed her with his indifference. The associates? The soldiers? But the silence and the darkness returned, sure accomplices in that tranquility disguised as a scene from an amateur theater production.
But that night she lay thinking. Bruno got up early, before five. He never said goodnight to let her sleep, but she almost always opened her eyes and

saw him get dressed, go out and close the door, and when the sound of the car engine faded into the morning, she closed her eyes until it was time for school.
That night, she didn't say anything either, but she kept thinking that something else was bothering him. He must be worried about those business partners he talked about so much. He had to do something to prevent a tragedy.
She spent the whole morning at school, distracted. She sat lost in thought, her head resting on one hand, her elbow on the desk. The recess bell rang, and the children poured out, seemingly unconcerned by the commotion and chaos. They hit her a couple of times, like practice shots, and only on the third time did she get up, angry, but not as angry as usual.
When he left, at five in the afternoon, he went directly to Bruno Méndez's workshop.
It was locked. That was so strange, he felt his heart pound and started banging on the metal shutter, knocking. He remembered the side door, and thank God he found it unlocked. Inside, there was only one car, Bruno's, and he was loading suitcases into the trunk.
"What are you doing here?" he said when he saw her.
-I was worried about you. Where are you going?
Look, Inés, I didn't tell you anything because I don't want to drag you into this mess any more. I'm going abroad for a while until things calm down.
-You screwed over your partners, Bruno, I know it, and they're going to kill you.
-Not if you don't say anything.
-And you think I'm going to talk?
Offended, she remained silent, watching him load the trunk.
-And why so many suitcases?
He didn't answer her. She put a hand on his arm and forced him to stop. They were fine suitcases, and they smelled of women's clothing, the kind that always have the perfume they wear.
-Are you leaving with your wife?
Bruno shrugged.
"What do you want, Inesita? This whole divorce and lawyer thing is driving me crazy. When it's over, I'll write to you so you can send me the money little by little, when it's safe."

She remained lost in thought. She still hadn't quite grasped what she was hearing, so the minutes passed, while buses drove by and stopped at the corner to pick up the children leaving the afternoon shift at school.
And there she stood, in the middle of a workshop with floors stained with gasoline and grease, calendars of women in swimsuits, tools lying around or hanging from nails on the walls, and punctured tires. The smell of rubber brought back memories.
The smell of Fabio Funes's truck's rubber in his last year, when he'd come home from the fields and throw himself on top of her, and she'd let him because she felt nothing anymore. And then, in the early morning, she'd make him coffee because she'd seen him cry all night. Poor old Funes, his head so tangled with sorrows and remorse. And one day they told her he'd killed himself. He'd left without saying goodbye.
Just like Bruno was doing now.
She had never felt rage, only anger toward the boys, their demands for respect and silence, their overwhelming words of contempt and defiance, and those countless images of hammer blows to the boys' hard heads to make them understand what she wanted them to understand. The ignominy of life. And how could she make them understand such a convoluted word, so full of philosophical and moral meanings?
Everything gets in by force, she thought, even if it destroys the walls of the dark limbo she's trying to enter. Another one will just be built around it.
Seeing Bruno with that kind of cynicism, she knew it wasn't real. It was a symbiosis of guilt and a narrow-mindedness that hadn't matured. He was a child in the way he stole and hid, as if he were playing tag. But as soon as his wife called him, he obeyed, contrite. That's what a wife was for, not a playmate like Inés.
She never knew where so much anger came from, because if she had analyzed it, she would have stopped. He simply forced her to grab the wrench hanging from a nail and began hitting Bruno over the head while she placed the third and final suitcase in the car.
The blood splattered the trunk and the body fell, and he hit his skull again to see, perhaps, what was inside, as if wanting to reconstruct the broken gears with that tool.
Or perhaps it was nothing more than revenge that had festered over time.

But Miss Inés's mind was too complex to be reduced to such trite sentiments.

4

Miss Inés, as she was always called, and even more so from then on, as the exemplary and inveterate spinster, became the *heart and soul* of the school. She was never the headmistress, but she was the driving force. She influenced the opinions of the teachers and professors when the secondary school was added, thanks to her persistent lobbying at the Ministry of Education. All the staff recognized Miss Inés's merits, but no one liked her. However, she was respected, and silence fell when anyone was within two meters of her, as soon as she passed by with her notebook and her hair, which slowly changed from a pale reddish hue to a more intense one as her gray hairs became more pronounced. Over the years, those who knew the story of her affair had either resigned, transferred to other schools, or she had made sure they were removed.

The murder at the workshop was talked about for a few days and then forgotten. There were no fingerprints on the murder weapon, and no witnesses to have seen anyone enter or leave the closed workshop that afternoon, amidst the bustle of excited children and anxious mothers trying to catch the bus home. The case was relegated to the files of open cases that would soon be dismissed, just like so many other shady dealings in the suburbs. That's how the press talks—the bad press, the one that doesn't know because it doesn't want to, or is afraid.

She didn't dwell much on what happened that afternoon. Over the years, the versions in her memory shifted, as if it were all something she'd seen, vivid and sentimental, in a television soap opera. Sometimes she thought of a knife plunged into her chest, the scene a kitchen; other times of a point-blank gunshot. But above all, the motives became like soap opera tropes: the schoolteacher deceived by the married heartthrob. Occasionally, she thought of the suitcase she'd forgotten in the little shed in the yard. She'd never opened it again, and what's more, the door to the hallway had been

bricked up by a bricklayer, so the little patio was now a kind of useless air well. An emptiness.
One day, a year later, a blond man, very well-dressed, came to visit her at school. Her classmates told her he looked like an American politician. She received him in the teachers' lounge while the others were in class. She imagined he was the father of a new student, and judging by his appearance, perhaps he had money.
-How can I help you, sir?
-Benítez, Miss Inés.
-I'm pleased to hear about me, Mr. Benítez?
- That's right, miss. A business partner of mine, Bruno Méndez, told me about you some time ago.
The young lady was stunned, but she didn't give in.
-I'm sorry for your friend, I heard about the terrible circumstances of his death.
" I appreciate it, but some friends are better lost than found, you know what I mean. But to get to the point, miss, I intend to enroll my two sons in school. They're twins, and very mischievous."
-But sir, you should speak with the director about those procedures...
-Well, the truth is that I've been told that you're the one in charge, and the reputation of your discipline has transcended, with all due respect, of course.
-I take that as a compliment, then...
"That's how it should be. In these permissive times, it's a relief to find someone with his ideas about our children's education.
The twins, Jorge and Daniel Benítez, were very young then, having entered the school halfway through first grade, and for ten years they were Miss Inés's biggest headache, a constant thorn in her side. Because Marcelo Benítez used his sons as instruments of torture in an interrogation that lasted all those years, searching for what he wanted to know, at first out of an urgent need, then out of sheer obstinacy. The whereabouts of the money Bruno Méndez had embezzled. No one could have been trusted with that, except, perhaps, that unknown schoolteacher he was sleeping with. The very insignificance of this character made her suitable to confide secrets she wouldn't even understand. But when Bruno was murdered, she wondered who had done it, whether it was that brute Rinaldi, the other

partner, trying to extract the information, or someone else. That no longer mattered as much to her as finding the money." Time passed, and inflation wreaked havoc on the value of the Argentine peso. That money, though substantial, was now worthless. So why did he keep insisting over the years?

This is the mistake. Benítez already had other worries and wasn't thinking about making amends for Méndez's deception. The boys took up the mantle, no doubt for fun. The fact is, they constantly pestered her, according to their age and abilities. At first, with pranks that had no consequences, but caused trouble and complications at school. Since their parents were separated, there was no one to complain to except their father, with whom they lived. At first, she covered for them, but then she began to delegate the responsibility for punishment to the school. The boys questioned and interrogated Miss Inés with insidious questions or questions directly related to death in general. It could be about a murder in the neighborhood or a robbery, and they asked her if she was married and had children. When someone was present, especially an adult, they attributed the curiosity to the boys' innocence and smiled at Miss Inés to reassure her that she shouldn't take things too seriously. But she punished them with penances almost every day, took away their recess, gave them extra tasks, or kept them at school two or three hours after class; she even made them clean the classroom.

When they grew older, she began to fail them, and they attacked even more viciously. They would draw chalk on bullets in the middle of class, and she could do nothing but leave the classroom and avoid them. The school committee and the parent-teacher association wanted them expelled, but she refused. Faced with this incomprehensible refusal, they kept quiet, because the atmosphere wasn't conducive to contradicting the teacher, who had the power to fire any other teacher before the Benítez twins.

She was no longer a primary school teacher; now she taught literature at the secondary level. The twins were her students every year, because she changed as they grew up. She sought them out with that counterattack, and they, understanding this, knew they had to intensify the pressure. They were already sixteen, and she made them repeat the year. It was the first time it had happened; she had never dared to go so far. The impunity they boasted of made them plan their futures at some European university or in

some corporation. They weren't cut out for that, as it turned out, but at that time they dreamed of it because the promises of the future justified their "exploits" of the present.
That winter, Miss Inés was run over in front of the school gates. Astute and quarrelsome lawyers managed to get them acquitted, due to their being minors and, above all, the impossibility of identifying which of the two was driving. In the meantime, while one of them was in a cast on his leg from the crash, they made sure to besiege her in the hospital, while she slowly recovered from the state of confusion the accident had plunged her into. She would wake up and talk to the boys, one at a time, because they were never together. Sometimes one had a cast and the other didn't, but she would confuse their names. They reminisced about their school days, and they asked her about her family. She talked about her childhood in the countryside, about her father. She smiled at the ceiling, and they prompted her to talk about her boyfriends. Inés thought about Bruno, she thought she spoke to him, but the sedatives made her fall asleep, and sleep came quickly.
That's how they found out. Inés talked in her sleep as if she were speaking to them, no longer enemies, but confidants. She mentioned, of course, Father Maccabee; those blond boys were as handsome as the priest, which is why she was confiding in him so uncomfortably now.
Finally, after so many years, Marcelo Benítez learned the truth. And then he called me.

This is where I come into this story. I was doing what I could; nothing ever scared me, just as nothing ever satisfied me. Back then, I was known in closed circles—I call them family groups with extensions in more or less marginalized social environments. Money comes from anywhere, and there's no reason to be picky about it. I worked on the railroads, in the workshops, and even as a train driver shortly before what I'm about to tell you. When they fired me, I was wandering around La Plata to see if my uncle Antonio would give me some work again, and also to see my son, at least from afar, because his mother wouldn't let me visit him. That's getting a bad reputation… but what does it matter! You are what you are, and the older you get, the more you accept yourself, to the point of accepting that fate, and even helping it along.

I don't know what old Benítez expected of me, or what he expected to see in me. Perhaps a filial dignity combined with an unscrupulous personality. Where has that ever been seen? Only in the movies.
Like I said, he had me in his contacts, maybe the military ones, or my uncle, most likely. He knew I was in the area. One of the guys who worked with my uncle found me and passed on the message. He was asking me to meet him at a café. He told me what the other kids had said. He asked if I wanted to avenge my dad's death and find the money. He couldn't go to school, much less put his kids in charge of that.
Fine, I said. But my old man's life had a price, and it was right that I should collect it. What can you do?
That week I spied on the staff's departure times at the school. When I was sure I wouldn't be disturbed all night, I went in and started searching. Quietly and methodically, the way I'd learned to work at Casas's bakery. I was about to give up and leave empty-handed. I stood in the hallway, hands on my hips, wondering where else to look, when I felt a draft of cold air. The classroom windows were closed; even the heaters were kept warm to welcome the children in the morning. I looked at the ceiling for a skylight. None. I went to the end of the hallway, where there was nothing but a white wall. I realized it had been built and plastered not long before. I went into the nearest classroom and climbed out the window. I peered over the wall and found the small, dirty courtyard overgrown with weeds. I climbed up and jumped. The thistles besieged me, but the discovery of the old shed gave me a glimmer of hope. The sheet metal door was locked. It was going to make noise, but what did it matter? I broke the handle; the lock fell out, disassembled by the rust that had corroded it. I shone my flashlight inside. Extreme humidity permeated the walls and floor. Rainwater had seeped in for years and stagnated for weeks before drying. There were sheets covered in mold, and a skeleton inside, its bones half-rotten. Beside it, a large suitcase, white with mildew. I opened it, as best I could. It seemed so fragile, but the humidity had hardened the hinges and the lock. I saw the bundles of banknotes, which were now nothing more than handfuls of paste. Was this the stuff he would hand over to Benítez, similar to the paper pulp with which he had made his fortune?
I went to the clinic where Miss Inés was hospitalized. The reception nurse was asleep; there was no one there to greet me at four-thirty in the

morning. I would give Miss Inés a scare, I would tell her about my father, of course. I climbed the stairs with a limp, remembering the clatter of his prosthesis that had characterized him since before I was born. My father, the limper. My father, the half-man who favored his eldest son because he was intelligent, because he was obedient, because he was athletic.

When I reached the shadowed room, the bed was illuminated by the light from the hallway. Miss Inés was staring at me from the bed, her hair disheveled, her arms outstretched, horror etched on her face. Then, as I approached, she covered her face to shield herself from my father's return. And she died.

I didn't need anything more for that. Just to let myself be confused with a man's shadow.

By the way, you must have already realized, but I am Oscar, that good-for-nothing, as he used to say, who is good for nothing.

THE AMAZON

1

Her name was Flora Romero, and she was born on the banks of the Matanza River. She lived with her mother in a shack made of sheet metal and wood in a shantytown, back in the early forties, when she was six or seven years old, maybe eight. Who could say for sure about these almost anonymous stories, rescued from old newspapers, which only recalcitrant obsessives like myself, Bautista Beltrame, dare to search for in libraries, digging through the filth and surrounded by the acrid stench of dampness and cat urine, those strange librarians who respect good books, I don't know if they've noticed, by chance or because of those insidious and uncertain causes associated with their lineage.

So, I was saying that when this story begins, Flora is just under ten years old, and she sleeps on a mattress on the cement floor of the shack her mother had somehow managed to get a few years earlier. Everyone in the neighborhood knew what her mother did for a living, so it wasn't surprising that the guy on duty had died one night after falling drunk into the river (the riverbanks are garbage dumps, or if not, just mud). The thing is, Flora slept in her underwear on the mattress, with barely a sheet in the winter, and the wood-burning stove was only twenty centimeters away. If she

didn't burn to death one of those winters in her childhood, it's because God had other, more interesting tragedies in store for her.
She watched the men come and go through the creaking door, like a woman in labor. And with them, the light from the neighboring pasture, where Flora sometimes played with the shantytown kids, if they let her. Because, in truth, she wasn't much use with her skinny, scrawny little body, that flat hair like a wet cat's, and those arms and legs that were like matchsticks. That stuck in her ears very clearly, because both her mother and the neighbors complained about "weak little Flora." She'd even get tired carrying a bag from the store for just one block, one of those long blocks in the shantytowns where you couldn't tell where one block began and the other ended.
The men would come in by daylight and then close the door, leaving only the phosphorescence of a cigarette falling to the floor along with the jingle of a belt buckle. His mother's bed was right there, a couple of meters away, but a curtain hanging from two bald guys on the ceiling tried to hide what it couldn't: the moans, the little cries, the curses, and the creaking of the old spring bed that had long since accustomed the whole neighborhood to its groans. Then he'd see one or the other—it didn't matter—go back to the door, sometimes naked, sometimes in their underwear, to smoke leaning against the frame, staring into the void above the sad, filthy river, taking the pleasure of kicking any dog that came near, and scratching his crotch while he watched the slow, endless construction of the apartment blocks the government had been promising for so long. They never, or almost never, paid attention to her, or didn't even see her, hidden in the shadows like a huddled, skinny dog.
But one night one of them approached, squatting next to the mattress, and touched his shoulder.
-Hey, stupid girl... what's your name?
Her mother had told her not to answer men who spoke to her in the street, but not if they did so inside the house. However, she thought better of it and didn't answer.
-What's wrong with you? Are you stupid or did the cat get your tongue?
She shrugged.

"Okay, little one. You're pretty, prettier than your mother, and younger, above all. I'm tired of old whores..." he said, muttering more to himself than to Flora.
The man stroked her shoulder and then her hair. She jumped, and her mother's voice could be heard from behind the curtain.
-Leave her alone, you son of a bitch, she could be your daughter.
And that's what obsessed Flora from then on. She had never thought she could have a father, since not even half the boys in the village had one. But the man's scent intoxicated her; only in that way can one define the fascination that began the process of her downfall. The man's scent and his strength, and the smoothness of his voice, confident and sarcastic, but above all, welcoming like a caress without hands.
The man left, but the next day, in the afternoon, when she had already forgotten about him, she found him in the street.
-Hi Flora, how's your mom?
She didn't answer.
-Whatever you want, but I imagine you like the circus, right?
She stared at him, impatient to get back home and cook the pair of steaks the butcher had given her on credit once again.
The man pointed over the shacks that lined the riverbank, which always seemed on the verge of slipping and sinking into the slow current that carried so much misery. She saw, then, the tip of a tall mast and a colorful triangular flag fluttering in the wind. He took her hand, without resistance, so enraptured was she by the ever-growing sight of the circus tent on the other side of the river, where the urban development began. Behind the garbage dump were the cars, and beyond the open fields of Ezeiza, the road to La Noria led even further, to the buildings to the south.
The tent seemed starlit beneath the sky, which darkened slowly and with a beauty she had never seen before. The river's stench, thick as a fog of grime and dew, this time served as a veil, concealing the horrors and highlighting the youthful images of undefined beings and landscapes, so uncertain that they undermined the imagination and exposed fragments of ancient treasures untouched by time. The sunset that day was golden, and she knew it even though she had never seen it before. Her eyes flashed, and when they both stopped after crossing the bridge, she rubbed her eyes because she was crying. It was the smog from the trucks and buses, it was

also the strength of that hand that gripped hers so securely, that she could see herself in the eyes of those who passed by: disinterested pedestrians who cast such a fleeting glance that it was painful, but that for the same reason spurred her on until she realized that she was a little girl going hand in hand with her father to the circus for the first time.
The banners fluttered high atop the tent, so impressive, so immense, that she had to stop for a moment, for fear of being swallowed up, or perhaps that the whole structure would come crashing down on her. The tarpaulins moved like the hide of a great prehistoric beast. But what did she know of all that, when she didn't even have a clue what a school was beyond what other children had told her: boredom and obligation. Quite the opposite of what she saw now, after having bought the tickets and walked down the aisle with its sand and sawdust floor between the bleachers, when the show had already been going on for quite some time.
First the lights blinded her, then she entered the shadow of the stands, where people were crammed together, laughing, pushing, eating cotton candy, and drinking. She heard the endless, disjointed, indecipherable din of the crowd around her. The man lifted her in his arms, pushed his way through the others to the front row, and made her sit on his knees.
Flora thought of nothing but the wonders she was seeing for the first time in the circus ring. Clowns in multicolored costumes and masks that were real faces, doing all sorts of clumsy acrobatics, bumping and shoving. And all of it was funny, a tremendous laugh that she couldn't help, caught up in everyone's enthusiasm, ecstatic about everything new. After the clowns came the acrobats on the tightrope, up there, at the very top of the tent. She was frightened, because she thought she saw them fall to the ground, but it wasn't true; they bounced off the net or grabbed onto ropes and catwalks high above, and in those moments she would grab onto the man's neck and feel his rough beard. The smell of tobacco and wine was different from the smell of her mother, from the smell of women. She clung to that man who perhaps, perhaps not, was her father, one of so many. Why not choose him, if he was the only one who took her to the circus?

Then he saw the elephants appear, who, despite moving slowly, danced to the rhythm of the band's music, or placed their enormous feet on the clowns who pretended to be crushed to death, only to suddenly rise up

whimpering with pleasure. Then came the dogs, countless dogs running all over the ring, jumping through hoops and bursting through barriers of fire. The men in tailcoats arrived to try and calm things down. The magicians and their assistants were pulling rabbits out of thin air, making things and people disappear, and building balloon towers only to have them destroyed by a clown wielding a deadly needle.

The action stopped.

Was it all over?

The master of ceremonies, with his top hat, bright red tailcoat, riding boots, and regulation whip, introduced the equestrian. Who was she?

The rider appeared on the back of a white horse, and a roar of approval erupted from the stands. She rode clinging to the mane, without a saddle or reins. She was blonde and slender, and wore a bodysuit as white as her skin. She appeared naked, yet she wasn't; she seemed fragile, but she proved stronger than the beast she rode. For after several laps, basking in the applause, and without the horse stopping, she reared up and stood upon its back, raising her arms and holding on to nothing. The animal trotted at first, then, at her command, began to gallop faster and faster, and the woman remained steady. Her bare feet seemed to float above the horse, barely touching it.

The applause never stopped. When it subsided, it erupted again as the rider stood on her hands and raised her legs, always in time with the parade. And then came other feats, like grabbing the horse's mane and performing acrobatics and tricks close to the left or right flank, or catching balls in mid-air that the clowns threw to try and knock her down, juggling them as well.

Flora clapped, her palms reddened, occasionally rubbing them on her skirt. The man offered her his handkerchief. Snot and all, she didn't notice. The man had introduced her to that being without bones, who seemed to be the very soul of the air penetrating the horse's skin to tame it.

The beast stopped, bowing and flexing first one leg, then the other. It had sequins around its head and above its ears. The Amazon greeted the crowd, moving back and forth across the circular arena, ready to greet everyone, even touch them, but the audience's reverence seemed to border on adoration. They shouted, praised, and wept, especially the women, while the men remained somewhat awestruck by this figure of such beautiful

body, which they so desired, yet which was like desiring an ethereal goddess.
The end had arrived. The marching band took over the arena with their shrill, out-of-tune brass drums, but it didn't matter. Everyone came out to take a bow—magicians, clowns, acrobats, and animals. People began to get up and walk toward the exits, applauding.

Flora and the man remained seated. She was lost in her astonishment, from which he had to rescue her, saying:
-Shall we go, baby? You liked it, didn't you?
Flora looked at him.
-And there's nothing else?
He laughed, picked her up, and walked in the opposite direction from the exit. The hallway was dark and smelled of excrement. The croaking of toads from the vacant lot could be heard. Suddenly, they emerged into the darkness of the night. He leaned against the canvas wall and began to smoke, as if forgetting about Flora. She watched him, trying to take one of his hands, because she felt safe and protected in the darkness so close to the river.
The cigarette leaped forward in an arc, and the little red dot went out. Not even that light was there anymore. She heard him move. The sound of his boots on the floor was circular, circling, then the stream against the canvas. She knew, of course; she had seen the boys and the men before. She wasn't ignorant of these things; she had even seen them naked at her mother's house. She waited for him to finish urinating. It was a long stream, cautious, one might say. Giving time, for what? Perhaps for Flora to trust him, even more, if that were possible. With that gesture of familiarity, he was giving himself to her like a father; that's how she understood it, without reasoning, just feeling it.
He turned around.
He took her hand. She touched that warm thing he was showing her, the thing she could just make out in the darkness. Flora's hand was under the control of the man's, and her own hand tried to grasp that strange thing, which she soon knew what it was, of course. She felt ashamed, afraid, frightened by what she was doing. But he stroked her head with his other hand, helping her rub that thing that gave him so much pleasure, apparently. That thing men like, her mother had told her a few times, that

thing so simple and stupid. That thing that costs women nothing and that men like so much. Would she tell her mother what she had done? Perhaps she would be proud instead of calling her silly and useless.
Then he stirred, as if contracting, and let out a hoarse cry. Her hand remained wet with that viscous liquid, which nevertheless smelled as warm as if it were in a field of tall grass. He fastened his belt and buttoned his shirt; she wiped it on her skirt, but the substance dried on her hand as they walked back in silence, through the darkness of the old bridge and then down the street filled with barking dogs, the object of the glances of the neighbors who already suspected what had happened.
He left her at the door of the booth. That night, he would refrain from dealing with his mother.

In the morning, the screams intensified to the point of making the corrugated iron walls tremble. But it wasn't the screams themselves, but the blows Maribel (that was the mother's name, or the name she used in the neighborhood) was delivering to her daughter. "You son of a bitch," she hurled at her, knowing, or perhaps not, in her hysteria, the truth behind the insult. "You little whore, you man-stealer," she said indignantly, "go get your own." A few people crowded a few meters from the door, through which Flora finally emerged, running toward the riverbank, without anyone trying to stop her. After all, she was alive, and that was more than many had seen in other shacks in the shantytown. Maribel also looked out, and she became enraged with those who were standing there, watching.
-And what about you? Go to hell!
Flora ran until she was exhausted along the riverbank, to where the river bent and the shacks dwindled into factories. She sat there, breathing heavily, her tailbone in the mud, sliding almost unconsciously toward the small waves of dirty water. Her arms on her knees and her legs bent, she looked only at the other side of the river basin, where the circus tent was an immense, futuristic dome with flags waving like those of a feudal castle. These are associations I make, of course, but interpreting Flora's wonder and desires and equating them with these images, because who knows what she imagined? Perhaps nothing, and her mind a desperate void demanding to be filled, or perhaps everything in a series of countless

overlapping images that formed a kind of monster that would devour her if she didn't let it out of her mind.
She felt a hand on her shoulder. She jumped and almost fell into the river if that hand hadn't grabbed her arm.
-What are you doing here, Florita?
The man was now looking at her intently, seeing her face despite her attempts to protect herself with her hands.
-That whore really messed you up, I can see that. Come here, I'll clean you up a bit.
She scooped water into a palm and washed his bloodied face. Once it was clean, the bruises appeared like butterflies.
"You look even prettier with those butterflies, Flora. It must be because of your name... right?"
She had no idea what he was talking about, but she liked the bit about butterflies in her face.
The man smiled, and she let herself be touched by those hands at whose touch the butterflies were not frightened.
They went back together. He was going to the factory, but his lateness didn't matter; they would go get her some clean clothes first. He stole some of the ropes they passed, in broad daylight. Nobody said a word. He left her at his house, a shack after all, but with brick walls and a tin roof. There was a cat instead of the many dogs that roamed around. The cat sat on Flora's lap, and the man said to it:
-Take care of him until I return; the dogs are always looking for him, but he avoids them by climbing onto the roofs.
Flora nodded.
The man's name was Casimiro.
-Tonight we're going to the circus.
And she spent the whole day thinking about that night.

They got dressed. He wore stained jeans and a black sweater. He wasn't tall, but he was muscular. She saw the muscles in his chest, and he looked different than when she'd seen him in his underwear sitting on his mother's bed. Now he was smiling as he watched her pet the cat over the hem of the little black dress he'd given her when he got back from the factory. "They have lots of them there," he said, "at the textile factory."

They crossed the bridge again, pushed through the lines of families, and bought their tickets. Back inside, for the second day in a row. Some shows were repeated, but the clowns were constantly improvising, and every minute something was different. The magicians' tricks bored her a little, but not the animals. This time there were pigeons, birds with multicolored plumage, and parrots—which talked, of course.

She had sat down again on Casimiro's lap, her arms around his neck, her eyes fixed on the ring. After the ventriloquist's act, which few celebrated because they didn't understand it, came what she had been eagerly awaiting.

The sound of trumpets announced and accompanied the equestrian's entrance into the arena. Flora let go and stood in the stands, her hands gripping the railing that barely separated her from the horse's flank as it approached her in the concentric circles of its turns. But she kept staring at the rider, with her flesh-colored tights, the sequins in her hair, and the shimmering makeup that highlighted her ever-smiling face. She even saw the sweat trickling down her temples as she drew near. She longed to touch her, to speak to her and kiss her. She smelled the scent of makeup, lipstick, mascara. It was the scent of the makeup case her mother kept in a small drawer by her bed, but they were old. Yet the rider's face was fresh despite the exertion. She was a woman with the body of a fairy, a fairy with the body of a woman. Flora didn't quite understand it, and yet she sensed it.

Suddenly, the man grabbed her and swept her up in his arms, leaving the steps leading to the sawdust- and sand-covered hallway. She screamed and resisted. The horsewoman wasn't finished. Ignoring her, he lifted her with one arm and rested her on his shoulder as she kicked and thrashed. The parents watched and laughed.

"But it didn't end!" she shouted over and over again.

-I need to pee, Flora.

They reached the end of the corridor, where the commotion had almost died away, and only the lights of the horse-drawn carts remained. He left her on the floor, sulking, and started urinating just like that. She watched, angry, observing the defiant stream that he no longer bothered to hide. He was half-drunk, she already knew. With one hand he held his penis, with the other he took a flask from the back pocket of his jeans. He threw away

the empty bottle, and there was no more stream. But he kept rubbing himself.
He approached Flora and lifted her in his arms.
-What's wrong with you, stupid girl? Do you like that girl on the horse that much? Do you want to ride her?
His tone was uncertain. Protective and threatening, she no longer understood, and in that effort the trumpets sounded once more, and she knew that the amazon was doing her pirouettes on the horse, as the day before, and surely other new ones that she could not see now, and she began to cry, looking towards the circus ring, far away, at the other end of the long corridor.
The man embraced her, spread her legs, and told her to press them against his body, as if she were riding him. She did as he said, and felt the strength of Casimiro's body, the warmth of his hairy belly against her thighs, and his hand caressing her. She wasn't wearing panties; the ones she'd had on that morning were dirty and hadn't dried yet. "Put on the dress I brought you," he'd told her. It didn't seem strange to her anymore; she'd slept naked so many times, gone out to wash her underwear in the sink in the yard so many times.
Casimiro swayed on his feet, mimicking a horse's trot. Flora jumped, but his arms held her. And suddenly, the pain. Like a stab wound, or a thrust, who knows. She knew what he was doing to her; she had seen her mother in bed, she had heard what the boys were saying in the street. That thing was inside her. It hurt her, but it was strangely revealing that this curious and new experience was a kind of discovery. A revelation, perhaps.
The pain lasted the shortest time; what remained and grew were the astonishment and surprise. Shouldn't those feelings have been reversed? Pleasure first, then humiliation? How could that be possible? Anyone would say that she should have been surprised and frightened first, and then, if there was any, recognized a most peculiar sensation, the mixture of pain and pleasure. As if she were a woman. She was a girl, of course, a girl who knew much more than the other girls. But knowledge is not experience, and experience can be complete knowledge.
He left her on the floor.
They heard the voice coming from the shadows.
"Go away or I'll kill you!"

They watched the clown approaching in the light of a spotlight. He was a boy, perhaps, but he imitated a man's voice. His face smiled, so contradicting the fury and the threat, that he seemed to be acting.
-What are you getting involved in, you idiot? Get out of here.
The clown responded by throwing a bottle that hit Casimiro in the chest. He got up, fastening his belt, but the clown raised an arm with a broken neck from another bottle.
Don't come any closer or I'll break your face…
Casimiro ignored him. The clown threw the broken bottle at his head, which began to bleed and stopped him. The clown walked away and brought more bottles, which he began to throw at him until Casimiro fell to the ground and tried to crawl backward. The clown wouldn't let him; bottle after bottle, he hit him on the head, until Flora said:
-Enough!
The clown looked at her.
-He's your old man, isn't he? Worse…
Don't kill him…
-If I'm not going to kill him, I just want to cut off his balls.
Casimiro was face down, probably with sawdust in his throat. Whether he was breathing, they didn't notice. The clown took Flora's hand and they went together toward the stands. The stranger's hand was soft and hairless. He was a boy, most likely. Not much older than her.

That boy was sixteen years old at the time. His name was Ernesto Lafuente, and he was the son of the owner of the Real Circus. That was the name of the company that had toured the provinces and neighboring countries for thirty years, ever since his grandparents, the Lafuentes, had founded it. Only he and his mother remained. His father had died, crushed by an elephant's foot. It was a tragic event that appeared in the newspapers for a few days, and that's how I had the opportunity to learn about the history of that circus.
These were different times, and Ernesto's mother's business was barely surviving its former glory. Too much competition and too few customers, she said. The film industry was a traitor that gave them no respite. If even the biggest international clowns were selling out to the silver screen, what could one expect for these meager Latin American salaries?

Lafuente, the teenage clown, took Flora to talk to her mother after the show. She told her what had happened.
"And you left him alive, man?" he asked his son.
In that woman, Flora thought she saw her mother: harsh, brooding, and accusatory. However, all that malice was not directed at her son.
-Yes, old lady. I guess so, I didn't notice.
The woman looked at Flora. She asked her name, and Flora told her hers: Marietta.
-Guess what I did for a living when I met his father?
-Yes, she was the fortune teller.
"I didn't say anything to her, old woman," Ernesto interjected.
-Look at that, maybe I have a successor.
"I want to ride..." said Flora.

The woman, with hair as red as the fire in the stove that heated the inside of the wagon, said, frowning:
-Do you want to be an equestrian?
-I don't know what that is...
-The amazon, my dear, that's what they say in the circus, it's French, but you'll learn.
He circled around her, touched her arms, felt her waist and the width of Flora's legs.
-Take it to Edith tomorrow.
-But old woman...
-I don't care what he says, we need to train a replacement, sooner or later he has to realize that he doesn't have much time left.
Flora listened but didn't understand. From then on, she slept on a straw mattress in the circus director's wagon.
The next day some police officers came by to take a look, tearing down a few things as usual.
"They found a guy badly injured, they almost killed him with bottles, ma'am. Do you know anything about that?" asked Commissioner Saldívar, who was constantly moving from one match to another depending on the messes he made.
Marietta shrugged:
"Go arrest the drunks who are ruining our shows, commissioner. This is a show for the whole family and..."

The commissioner raised his hands in surrender and left with his men.
Edith was the stage name of Elba, a woman who was already thirty-five years old despite looking fifteen years younger. But when Flora met her, she heard the groans of her joints when she walked, when she shook hands, when she barely moved her head.
-Osteoarthritis, my dear. The worst enemy for us, worse than death.
When she said that, he knew she accepted him, despite Ernesto's reservations. They looked at each other, across the vast gap of their age difference. He knew then that he was hopelessly in love, and he would wait as long as it took. What he had seen didn't matter; perhaps that's why Flora was different. Does love spring from the harsh or from beauty? And is it even possible to call such a thing love?
Time passed, perhaps ten years. Marietta's death left the circus in Ernesto Lafuente's hands. He faced the responsibility of continuing not only a nearly forty-year-old tradition, but also maintaining the livelihoods of a hundred people and their families, and all the infrastructure that was constantly breaking down and had to be replaced, at the risk of succumbing to the perpetual crisis and being buried by the other circuses, which competed like wild beasts for survival. The circus mafia had threatened to destroy the Lafuente family if they didn't give in. Marietta died suddenly, of a heart attack, cursing those gypsies, as she called them, uniting in one word and another all the power of Eastern European tradition: the mafias mixed with Soviet power, and on top of it all, the hypocritical diatribes of the Vatican.
They closed for two months, which turned into six. He promised to pay salaries while he decided, but people gradually abandoned him. The animals died in their cages, the tarpaulins were torn, the metalwork rusted. The only one still training was Flora. She was eighteen now, and better than her teacher, who had died the previous summer in Rivadavia Hospital, suffering from joint pain. She trained in the fields of Ezeiza, where the equipment was stored in large wooden crates exposed to the rain and damp of winter, and in an old train car pulled by a tractor that had taken it on tour, but which no longer ran. Flora clung to her optimism, caring for her colt, because Edith's horse was already dead and buried, or more likely thrown into the Matanza River when it collapsed and died during its final performance.

Flora's horse was black, the tights she had fashioned were black, and on her head she wore a black feather like crepe. But Flora smiled at a still-unseen audience, trying out new juggling and acrobatic tricks every day, and at night she wrote them down one by one, with diagrams and symbols. Ernesto had taught her to read. Although they weren't a couple, everyone considered them to be. But he remembered that night, and he had never dared to ask her what she thought, what she remembered. Flora laughed and played.
Flora was happy in a dismantled circus.
Until Colonel Gonzaga appeared in their story.

2

Archibaldo Gonzaga was the son of a military officer from Tucumán and an English governess. His mother called him Archie when he was a boy, and later Archibald. She taught him English and sent him to London, where her family, once impoverished, had recovered thanks to the marriage of the daughter she taught in the distant pampas. General Justiniano Gonzaga, his father, owned half of Tucumán and was also a friend of Perón. He had money, of course, but Archie had been his only child. At least that's what he said, but considering his wife's frigid behavior in bed, he must have had many women. She, of course, wasn't interested. Cloistered in her gardens in Tucumán , she only traveled to Buenos Aires or Europe with her lady's companion to go to the theater, because she had two passions: her son and opera.
Archibald was a handsome young man. Between 5'9" and 5'11" tall, perhaps just the right height, he had a broad chest and well-built arms. He played soccer, much to his mother's chagrin, but he also went to the Lawn Tennis Club, rowed in Tigre, and even played golf in San Isidro. All of that in the afternoons or on weekends, because in the mornings he studied law at the University of Buenos Aires. Of course, a public university; his father had insisted on that, and she had to give in. As for exams, he would study one Sunday afternoon, locked in his room, alone or with his friends, amidst

the smoke of cigarettes and the haze of hard liquor, and occasionally a cheap red wine that filtered through his mother's stern gaze.

The thing is, he'd graduated as a lawyer at twenty-six. When he received his diploma, his mother gave him a dirty look, because there were others who weren't even close to his level and had graduated at 23 or 24, and on top of that, with state scholarships. What could you do? But the kid was already a lawyer, and with a look that had caused quite a stir among his female classmates. He was blond, with wavy hair parted on the right, and blue eyes he'd inherited from his mother. From the general, he got his rigid, square face, thick beard, and a lot of body hair. He was a man with a masculine presence but refined manners. He never talked too much, never shouted, except during military training. Following tradition, he trained like any other private, at least at first, in El Palomar or La Tablada. When he graduated as a lawyer, he'd been promoted to colonel. Others, of course, had to wait for the next round of promotions.

The day Gonzaga met Flora, he was on his way to the airport, which had been inaugurated a few years earlier during Perón's first presidency. The road was still unpaved, and when his car broke down, he was stranded in the middle of a field with the hood up, trying to figure out what was wrong. But the problem had been the stupidity of the mechanic who worked for him in Buenos Aires: he hadn't filled the tank with gas. Perhaps the cynical mechanic assumed that Archibald would occasionally glance at the car's dashboard.

He looked around; only fields and trees, and a few shacks that didn't inspire much confidence in asking for help. He had to catch the last flight of the day to Rio; he had to mediate in a conflict the government had tasked him with—something about borders, customs, and international law. Important, of course, and his father had been involved in that assignment. He checked the time on his Rolex; he wouldn't make it. And how would he get gas? He locked the car, resigned to the fact that when he returned, he might find nothing but the chassis, if it was even still there.

He started walking toward a building that looked like a shed or a factory. When he arrived, he couldn't quite make out what was in that jumble of boxes, scaffolding, cages, hundreds of meters of fabric, and a few horses. And then he saw a black colt galloping in circles. It seemed to be alone, but

when he got closer, he saw a black figure on its back , which looked almost like it was made from the horse's own mane.
It was Flora, whose long hair and long black feather resembled another part of the animal's body, not only because of the way it moved on its back, but also because of the harmony of its contours and the texture that impressed the eyes of anyone who saw it.
He stopped to watch her from a distance, arms crossed, one foot slightly ahead of the other, in a pose more like a dandy than a soldier. He learned to distinguish her movements as she commanded the animal to change its rhythm or gait, and she would stand on its back, first on one leg, then the other, and leap. And in that brief interval in the air, she was like a black heron floating above the dark river of the colt, which continued on without her, but for such a short time that Flora would descend again precisely onto its haunches. And the colt's tail served as an extension of her long black hair.
She was not just an equestrian, Gonzaga told himself, she was a messenger of death, but death itself.
As he watched, fascinated, that ride over the desolate field of the sunset, covered in shadows, where the damp cold condensed the particles of life into the static asynchronous forms of the frosted dew, which seemed to crack at the passage of the last plane that now passed by boasting of him, of his forgetfulness and his carelessness, of the stupidity that kept him in that field before the figure of a woman.
He didn't care about the future, nor his desire to fulfill the expectations everyone had placed on him. He only wished to see, speak to, touch, and possess that figure who dominated the world in that small, infinitesimal instant.
And the thunderous sound of the plane hid the chords that came to him like music born from the countryside and the impending night, distracting him from that kind of hypnosis, and he heard the broken voice of a man beside him.
-What brings you here, sir?
He turned around. It was a man her age, with a sullen expression, clean-shaven, wearing breeches and riding boots, a riding crop in his hands in front of his knees. His hair was long, brown with reddish tones, like

Marietta's. It was Lafuente, and she told him so. They shook hands after the brief, tentative exchange of distrust.
"Look, friend," said Gonzaga, in a folksy tone that didn't suit him well. "My car broke down on the road, I missed my flight, and here I am."
-Let's go see the car, but first let me bring a horse in case we have to tow it here.
Gonzaga didn't tell him he preferred to call for help, but when he saw him walk toward the wagons and join the woman on the horse, talk for a while, point at him from a distance, and then immediately see her mount again and run toward him, he forgot all of this, even who he was . Death was approaching, and when it was inches away, he had to grab the bridle because he thought it was going to trample him, feeling the breath of its muzzle on his face, and touching the jet-black coat. Death, suddenly, became intense life, as intense as he had imagined death to be.
"Good afternoon, sir," she said. "Ernesto is coming with the animal. But don't worry, Ernesto knows a lot about mechanics."
"I can imagine, miss," he said, tipping his hat and waving. "With all the machines this circus has, when do they open?"
"We don't know, sir. What you see here are ruins. We're in bad shape, bankrupt."
"But you're still training. You're a wonderful equestrian, miss. The best I've ever seen."
She laughed; with that look, she didn't see him as a regular at the circus.
"Not even in France have I seen what you do, miss. There are many pirouettes there, but your grace, I have never, ever seen before."
Ernesto arrived and the three of them went to the road. Before Lafuente could approach the engine, he distracted him with a conversation about it and cut a belt. He was embarrassed, it's true, about the reason for the damage, but now he wanted to stay longer.
Lafuente then peered into the engine, reached inside, and uttered what everyone expected. A belt had broken, and there was no other option but to take it to the garage. He and Ernesto attached a chain to the horse's harness and tied it to the front bumper. Archibald took off his coat, rolled up his sleeves, and got his boots and hands dirty. He was strong, and this man, who got along so well with Ernesto despite their differences—different bodies, one trained in sports, the other by work—admired it. The

newcomer's beard was barely grown since morning, and Ernesto's sweat dripped from his temples, dampening his hair.
Ernesto mounted, and the horse slowly pulled the car across the muddy field. Archibald pushed from behind if it got stuck. Flora offered her help. The men laughed and continued pushing and pulling.
When they arrived, it was already night. They put the car in the shed.
-Well, friend. Thank you very much, I was afraid it would be stolen. Do you have a phone number I can call so they can come and get me?
"But look, it's already late, Mr. Gonzaga. Don't you want to stay until tomorrow? If you've already missed your flight, what's the rush?"
Flora's apparent boldness embarrassed Ernesto a little, but he smiled, as if he had been waiting for those words.
No, they've already done a lot for me. I understand they're busy and I don't want to get in the way.
"No way! Gonzaga, the problems aren't going to be worse because a friend needs help for one night. We're not starving, are we, Flora?"
She responded by simply shrugging her shoulders .
And then Archibald knew that something was happening there in which he could intervene.

In the morning, he called a friend. They heard him speaking softly, his lips partially hidden as he held the phone with both hands. That day, the friend didn't arrive; he had things to do.
"You see, Ernesto, that's how people are, they ask for a lot but give little," he said while they were having lunch.
"Don't worry, Doctor," he said, having already told them about his profession and the purpose of the postponed trip. What he would leave for later was his rank in the army. "I think I've found the problem, besides the belt. I was low on gas, you know."
Gonzaga pretended not to hear.
-But I already got him one, to tide me over until I can take him to a good mechanic in Buenos Aires.
In the afternoon, while Ernesto worked on the engine, Archibald and Flora drank mate sitting in two hammocks.
-Nice afternoon, Flora.
-That's right, doctor.

"Don't be so formal, miss, call me Archi, like my mother. And tell me how you learned your trade."
-I've been practicing for ten years, my teacher's name was Edith.
-But you not only need skill, but also an affinity for circus life.
-I suppose so, I haven't thought about it too much, I hardly know anything else.
"You could perform on any stage in Europe, Flora, I assure you. You have to reopen this circus. I'm going to help you."
Ernesto approached, wiping the grease off his hands with a dirty rag.
-And how much is that going to cost us, doctor?
Flora's smile disappeared, absorbed by the reflection of the sun on the puddles between the carts that hadn't moved for almost a year.
"I understand your distrust, Ernesto. We can talk tonight, if you like, and I'll tell you my idea. Don't take offense, my friend."
-If I'm not offended, doctor, I just distrust money that rains from the sky, because even God takes his due.
Gonzaga laughed and threw the cigarette into the mud.
-I charge less than God, Ernesto, don't worry.
Lafuente looked at him, and it was clear he inspired confidence with his dapper face and his conversational style, devoid of any artifice. He knew, from experience, that lawyers don't do anything without a reason. But this man, my God, he thought, was revealing his talents like layers of an onion. I would find out that night, gathered at the dinner that consisted of almost fifty people who remained loyal to the Lafuente family and the circus, or who didn't know how to do anything other than the art they had made for almost their entire lives, and that's why they kept waiting, without really knowing what for.
It was an impromptu barbecue that surprised everyone. The famous friend she'd spoken to on the phone arrived at six in the evening in his truck with many kilos of meat and offal, as well as vegetables and potatoes. The men and women came out of the wagons and sheds, breaking the near-seclusion imposed on them by winter. Laborers, cooks, seamstresses, skinny acrobats, and strong, bald men, dwarfs, and the clowns who, without their masks, looked like poor homeless people. Flora put her hands to her mouth to stifle her tears; Ernesto saw the doctor's friend get out with all those bags he could barely carry, and said aloud, shouting, demanding:

"What are you doing standing there like idiots?! Help, come on!"
Many people formed the line, carrying bags of fresh meat, bags of potatoes, and bundles of green vegetables and tomatoes. There was everything, everything they hadn't seen or eaten in a long time.
Flora ran to hug Gonzaga. She was slender but strong-limbed, and barely reached his chest. She wept, her face pressed against the shirt Archibald hadn't changed in two days.
Ernesto looked at them, and although he was happy, he knew something was already written. He knew this because his mother, the fortune teller, wasn't just a figment of his imagination, but a witch of the few remaining kind, and she had spoken to him many times about the signs of fate. The moment he saw them embracing, he renounced the intuition his mother had advised him to heed. Logic told him the course of events, and he wondered if so much magic was worth it, if, in the end, the slavish passage of daily life mattered more than any feigned imagination.
During dinner, they all chatted together, and many got drunk, because, of course, the doctor's friend had also brought wine. His name was Farías, and he was a doctor, too. A candidate for Minister of Health, he said. And many looked at him, astonished, unsure how to behave, inhibited yet also spurred on by the need to ask him about the pain that had appeared in their stomachs, or the fracture that had been crooked when they fell off the swing. Ernesto looked at the long table where his people were eating happily, as if reborn. Who was Archibaldo Gonzaga? And what did he want? This was obvious. Flora and the doctor laughed, whispered in each other's ears, held hands, even kissed each other on the cheek. Flora's fair complexion was flushed with a natural blush. And Gonzaga's body, with its long beard, unkempt hair, and open shirt revealing blond hair, was that of a guardian angel, a peasant working with his hands, a soldier on leave in his village. All of that together and none of it at the same time.

Suddenly, he stood up with a glass of wine and shouted for silence. He had to wait five minutes before everyone obeyed. It was midnight in the middle of the Ezeiza countryside. The airport lights were mere fireflies on the horizon. The Matanza River flowed with its murmuring stream of muffled crickets.

-Gentlemen, please, I have something very important to tell you. Ernesto, I apologize if I take the liberty of speaking to you and your people in this way, but for me it's as if I've known you all my life.
Many must have thought he spoke too eloquently, and that they'd already heard it all before, on the radio. The doctor spoke like a politician, and so they waited for his promises.
What they've done for me, the way they've welcomed me, is priceless. These past two days I've thought about thanking them and leaving, so everyone could go their separate ways. But I've seen things that have touched me deeply. Lafuente's unwavering friendship, of course.
He grabbed Ernesto by the arm and pulled him close, like two brothers. He was sincere, surely, or so Lafuente felt, his shame never quite subsiding. His people looked at him in a way they'd never seen him before: under the tutelage of someone they knew to be richer and more intelligent.
-But above all, I was moved by a little person who is like a bird that dominates the beasts.
He placed his other hand gently on Flora's shoulder.
"Friends, Flora is an immeasurable artist, I truly mean it. I've already traveled extensively, I assure you: Paris, Berlin, Moscow. She could be in those places. But I'm not taking her with me, don't worry. What I want is to help you revive the tradition that the country's economies are constantly striving to destroy. We'll sort it out, perhaps. My father, General Gonzaga, will have a lot to do with it. The armed forces know what they have to do. And so do I, friends."
She let go of Ernesto and Flora, raised her glass again, and said:
-I propose a toast to the reopening of the circus, for which we, Dr. Farías and I, and the foundation we preside over, will contribute the necessary elements for that resurrection.
There was a void of silence, like a hiatus in time, where even the buzzing of mosquitoes could be heard. Then, the ovation erupted. Chairs were knocked over, glasses shattered. Flora wept, and even Ernesto, determined not to back down, felt his eyes fill with a gleam he tried to suppress with a lump in his throat.
The celebrations lasted all night. No one could sleep until well past dawn. Flora, after hugging them both, went to bed because Ernesto told her to. She wanted to talk to Gonzaga alone.

They had both drunk too much. Farías left them alone; they saw him go into the wagon where one of the dancers was sleeping.

They sat side by side in the hammocks that same afternoon. Cigarettes and wine and tequila and beer. Both were holding on, and their minds remained clear.

-Everything happened very quickly, doctor.

-The whore…

-Excuse me...Archi...Archi...I don't know why, but it sounds like something outlandish to me.

-Like a circus performer, perhaps?

-Could be…

-It's because I must have something of the artist in me…

-That's clear, my friend.

Gonzaga burst out laughing.

"Nothing gets past him, Ernesto, that's why I see how he's managed to keep so many people going all these months. Yes, I admit it, I'm a loudmouth, a die-hard politician, but it's because I'm aware of it and I do it despite myself; I'm a little disgusted with myself. I trust the military more, my friend."

-They kill with their weapons, and that's it, no more talking.

-That's right, politicians, on the other hand, kill so slowly, it's torture.

-And you say so, Dr. Gonzaga?

-And who do you want to say it better, the security guard on the corner? He's part of the disease, he knows the symptoms better than anyone.

Time passed, and the night's charms faded. It must have been around 4:30 in the morning. The roar of airplanes could be heard in the distance.

-And tell me, Ernesto. Does Flora have a boyfriend...or something like that?

That was the turning point in this whole story. How many times did Lafuente wish she could go back in time and change her answer, but it had already been spoken.

"No, my friend. She has a clear path. But please take care of her. She's very fragile..."

Gonzaga smiled in the cigarette light, and his lips were barely visible.

-Like a butterfly, I know, Ernesto.

That night, despite their exhaustion, they finalized their plans. Beforehand, Lafuente wanted to ensure they would be safe from thugs and mortgages.

Once he was certain that Gonzaga would protect them, he had no choice but to yield to the ideas of his patron, as he preferred to be called. They were brilliant ideas, demonstrating Gonzaga's artistic or commercial intuition, whatever it may have been. First, they would change the circus's name to "Royale de Paris." The idea was to Europeanize the circus, give it a new aesthetic, and reinvent its history. The traditional Argentine circus was outdated, and the popular style, so fashionable with Perón's rise to power, would soon fade away. What wouldn't fade, however, was good taste, Archibaldo Gonzaga said.
Ernesto Lafuente, the director and master of ceremonies, would become Monsieur Lafitte, just like that, without a first name, and that strange accent he used to speak in, a mixture of Italian, Cocoliche, and Provençal, served him perfectly. Where had he learned it, he asked. From my mother, of course, he said, she spoke in tongues, like any witch, in her trances, and I, hidden behind the tarpaulins of the witch's tent, learned by repeating.
Flora Romero was too common a name for an artist like her. The three of them brainstormed many possible names to give her artistic moniker. She said: Edith. Gonzaga considered it; he wasn't entirely convinced, but it wasn't bad, and he decided against contradicting her when he learned the reason, but added: you need a last name.
Edith Lammonde, equestrian.
And that's how Flora began the middle stage of her story.

3

It was a brief period, of course, compared to the previous one, but the dizzying pace of events acted as a kind of anesthetic for the pain that always lurks beneath the surface, even in periods of happiness, and which might have warned her of what was to come. But was she different from everyone else? Let's not expect miracles.
The circus was reopened, as if it were a completely different place. The tent was remodeled, the wagons painted. The old and sick animals were euthanized and taken to the slaughterhouse. The seamstresses were given

a new lease on life when the new fabrics arrived, and both the clowns and all the other staff had their costumes updated with unmistakable signs of the Commedia dell'arte style. Lafitte, as Ernesto now called himself, had spent entire nights planning new programs. He left the choice of acts in the ring to each individual, but they had to submit their decisions to him for approval.

The only exception was Flora, or Edith, as we'll call her from now on. She was the only one who could address him as Ernesto when they were alone, nor did she have to wait for his approval of the new routines, even though she discussed them with him and asked for his opinion. She also never changed her costume—a small black bird with white limbs—which was, so to speak, her leitmotif. The messenger of death who floated above the surface of the world, barely touching it, while all the spectators watched her in rapture.

It was this advertising and aesthetic strategy that determined the resounding success of the Circus Royale de Paris during those years. On the walls of the old train car, as well as the others that Gonzaga had managed to expropriate from the railway, was painted the figure of Edith, the equestrian. She was the star attraction, so to speak, drawing crowds from all over. Once their success was firmly established in Buenos Aires, they embarked on a long, and perhaps too extensive, tour throughout the country: Rosario, Córdoba, Mendoza, Tucumán, Salta, and from there to Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Brazil, then down to Uruguay, and finally taking a ship to Patagonia, in a kind of epic journey unprecedented for a Latin American circus. Under the protection of the tent pitched amidst the winds near the Atlantic, Edith's horse circled the concentric rings of the circus ring, while the brass band drove out the biting inferno of wind and cold. They even staged outdoor shows, erecting scaffolding so the acrobats could test their endurance against the unpredictable elements. It goes without saying how successful this idea was, whether Lafitte's or Gonzaga's, and how widely it garnered national media attention.

All of this led to the contract for the European tour. No one had any fears, resentments, or doubts about the quality and success of the undertaking. There were rumors, even threats that Gonzaga took care to conceal, from the usual troublemakers, the powerful organization that always tried to pull the strings in this profession they claimed as their own by mere cultural

tradition, but obviously also by the stronger tradition of money. The "gypsies," as Gonzaga called them, were grasping at straws in front of this bastion that the military had seized. Of course, it was obvious that the money invested in the circus, facilities, travel, maintenance, food, costumes, and contracts came from Gonzaga's connections, but it was also clear that the investment had paid off; however, in the opinion of Archibald's inner circle, all the media circus that had formed around such a distinguished institution for the nation was unjustified.

Archibald's parents admonished him when they learned how he had used his money and connections. General Justinian understood that it was all about elevating his son's mistress to success, and what he manfully justified, he officially condemned. His mother was furious when she found out about all of this, and especially about the scandalous relationship—that's what she called it—of her beloved son with a " *circus whore* ," and those were her exact words, always with that ingrained English accent. Something had to be done about the boy, his parents told themselves, but meanwhile, they read in the newspapers about the good reviews and the success of the Latin American tour, and in the gossip columns, about the relationship between the promising Colonel Gonzaga and the beautiful, petite equestrian from the fashionable circus.

The relationship, then, deepened. They were a couple everyone knew and admired. Gonzaga's refinement, intelligence, and above all, his wealth, were a perfect complement to the talent contained within Edith's delicate body, whose figure seemed destined for a ballet dancer, yet had led her to dance on the back of a moving horse. Anyone who saw her could not deny the harmony of her natural movements, even the most elaborate and contorted ones she performed, with the subtle hint of anguish and fatalism evident in the choreography she herself had invented. Her eyes, so heavily made up with black makeup, and the crepe feather accentuated these connotations, which no one could resist. At the end of each performance, five seconds of silence fell from the audience, a somber silence that everyone shared without premeditation, to recover from the pandemonium she had unleashed in each of their souls. And then came the thunderous applause and the ovations that followed, especially in Europe: Paris, Vienna, Rome, Berlin. The circus lost a couple of members who couldn't

resist the temptation of contracts offered by other circuses. They offered millions for Edith, but she wasn't for sale.
Upon returning from her European tour, she learned she was pregnant. It had been almost five years since she met Gonzaga, and he had always advised her to be careful. She did everything she could to avoid it, knowing that Archibald's love was bought and that a pregnancy could interrupt her career and perhaps even end it. She couldn't afford to have a child in the midst of her success, but above all, she feared his reaction.
She waited, thinking that time would be patient with her indecision, pausing or slowing the passage of Cronus. But three months had already passed when Cronus made his revelation in an apparent conspiracy with Ate, both of them tasked with confusing her and drawing her back into the fatalism from which she had believed she could escape. This is how Edith thought, immersed, without knowing how, in the memory of the curious conversations with Marietta Sottocorno, Ernesto's mother. Things she hadn't understood before, she now saw clearly with the horror of certainty. She wasn't sure she wanted a child, but she longed for the one who would be the perfect image of Archie, the handsome man who had protected and loved her. She had seen him troubled, sad, and worried, as well as his tender moments bordering on helplessness and his whimpering, and then the outbursts of violence he unleashed in target practice sessions in the open countryside against cans, bottles, and even rats.
She told no one, not him, nor her friends, who were few and far between anyway, especially since they considered her the undisputed owner of the circus. Those who didn't envy her tried to avoid her. That's why she was alone, and she continued performing back in Buenos Aires.
They had set up the facilities in a vacant lot in the Saavedra neighborhood, near General Paz Avenue. It was the first days of August; the tickets were sold out, in addition to those given away to orphanages and nursing homes, because it had been announced that the proceeds from the evening performance would be donated to the Society of Beneficence. Gonzaga was a great strategist; the power of Perón and his wife was wreaking havoc on the people, dominating them like a magician perfectly suited to his circus. But whether in the circus or in the Government House, it was never wrong to stay on good terms with the people, while other plans were always being hatched in the basements of his mind, beneath the uniforms and weapons,

inside worn leather trunks, as if brought back from the desert by old legionnaires. His mind was a madness, at times.

That Saturday night, a long line of people had been queuing since early morning, watching children in wheelchairs or on crutches, or people with intellectual disabilities, pass by, staring blankly or pointing with their arms and stupid smiles at the tall banners waving in the Buenos Aires sky. Gonzaga had hired small planes to drop propaganda leaflets for the event, circling all afternoon announcing the events through megaphones and performing aerobatics or releasing colored smoke from their tails.

All that pre-show spectacle drew even more people, who, even if they couldn't get into the circus, had crowded around to see the clowns who had come out to entertain during the long wait. Laughter, excitement, enthusiasm, happiness. All of that mingled under the sun, with the vendors selling chocolates, peanuts, cookies, choripán (sausage sandwiches), cotton candy, and wafers—a mix of flavors for every taste and temperament. There were no fights, only cordiality. There were a few rough moments, but they were simple matters of the heart. The din drowned out the cries of chaos, which blended into the strident music of the brass band that sounded thunderous, the barking of the juggling dogs, and the trumpeting of the three Indian elephants that had cost a fortune—and yes, it had been worth it, because after Edith's skills, they were the main attraction with their delicate brutality. Edith had had the idea of being lifted by the trunk and once on the head and back she would do pirouettes without the insecurities of riding her black horse.

Night had fallen and the show had begun. The first explosion was heard by very few, only those in the stands closest to the bomb. It shattered the wooden planks; many were startled, but apparently no one was injured. The movements in the circus ring continued, simultaneous for all four sections of the stands, an overwhelming spectacle that foreshadowed the shows that would become commonplace decades later. The security guards notified Monsieur Lafitte, who left the ring in his ringmaster's attire, top hat, boots, and riding crop. He saw the minor damage and swore in Creole when he saw a woman with a bloody head.

"What do we do, Monsieur?" asked the manager.

-Call Gonzaga, and an ambulance…

Before he could finish his thought, the second one exploded. It wasn't at the back of the stands, but at the front, next to the track. This time there was fire, and one of the central pillars, which despite being metal was surrounded by garlands and fabrics that were all highly flammable, began to burn. He saw the flames growing rapidly and powerfully toward the tent's dome. He imagined the flames devouring the canvas, which, despite all the precautions, couldn't be protected from the fire. He thought about the insurance first; Gonzaga was in charge of that.

There was no longer any need for caution; people were screaming and stumbling down the steps. The guards tried to calm everyone and guide them toward the exits, but the men and women, when it came to their children in danger, were often incorrigibly reckless. Hardly paying attention, they went wherever they pleased, finding themselves in corridors that led to dead ends , and many died trapped there. The children from the orphanage moved the slowest; for many, the fire was just another spectacle, for others, a form of reality they didn't understand. The nuns who cared for them were the desperate ones; they pushed, prayed, shouted, and gave orders, until they realized that everyone would succumb to divine punishment. Perhaps they thought that God wanted to take all those sick souls so they wouldn't suffer any longer.

It took almost half an hour for the fire trucks to arrive. The fire had already consumed everything flammable: the multitude of fabrics and the immense quantity of wooden props for clowns, magicians, and jugglers. In the ring, the elephants had panicked and charged wherever they could, over objects and people. Edith, who was on her horse during the second explosion, heard the blast without losing her balance. She knew her colt, strong and obedient, accustomed to the harmless but thunderous firecrackers of the clowns. But she hadn't counted on the fire, and she didn't know how it would react. It was too late when the animal stopped abruptly and reared up. Edith fell backward and saw the flames engulfing the central pillar, and people running, falling on top of each other, and her companions running this way and that, helping each other, except for her, whom they hadn't seen, or simply didn't think needed help. Her back hurt, but she could move her legs. Amidst all the confusion, I searched for Ernesto. I thought I saw his red jacket in the distance. I looked for his horse and saw it trotting along, frightened, like a black stain of darkness moving and slipping away

from those who tried to catch it, because the darkness offered safety and coolness.
And the fire was all heat and fury, and a tremendous noise of incessant crackling: the wood and the fabrics, the old leather, the paints, the varnishes. Everything smelled of tanneries and burnt rubber, and he remembered the Matanza River in his childhood, the burning they did along the riverbank of the garbage that accumulated for months and that the city people and trucks unloaded every day.
When she tried to get up, she saw Lucifer, her colt. I forgot to mention his name, of course. I should have, and not played a trick on the readers of this chronicle. Why did she name him that, you'll want to know? It wasn't Flora who did it, but Marietta, the circus owner at the time. The original Edith's mare was called Magdalena, she was white, as we already mentioned, and the old equestrian's costume was white. By naming him that way, and knowing that Flora would be the next performer in that show, she was perhaps playing with contrasts. Was the black costume a consequence of the colt's color? Possibly. Was it all a game of symbols? That's for sure. But Marietta must have known that you don't play around with these things. Women like her don't gamble without being certain; moreover, her actions aren't a gamble, but a certainty already realized, even though it hasn't happened yet.
The horse ran over her. She didn't blame it, but herself. She looked at her legs, torn into several fragments like thin zigzag lines. She saw Lucifer continue running, ignoring her call, called out by the desperation of the fire that engulfed him. Until she saw him disappear into the flames of the tent that collapsed like an immense fiery blanket, the sea of the sky that was burning, the firmament dissolving in waves of fire.
Of what happened next, he remembered nothing. Only when he woke up in Rivadavia Hospital. His legs had nails through them and were supported by two weighted devices. There was a nurse by his bedside.
"How are you feeling?" he asked her.
She opened her lips and moistened them with her tongue. Her throat was dry. The nurse gave her water.
-Nothing hurts.
"I'm glad, but it's because of the anesthesia. She came out of surgery two hours ago."

Edith looked at her legs again.
-Did they put nails in them?
It was strange that she spoke of her legs as if they were other entities than herself.
-Yes…for the moment, but the doctors will explain it to you.
-And my baby?
I could no longer hide it from that stranger, and I was not in a position to judge her.
-He's still there, and he seems to be doing well. He was very lucky in that catastrophe.
That's how the newspapers described the circus disaster all week. They tried to hide it from her, but she overheard the conversations in the courtyard beyond her bedroom window, as well as the radios of the ambulance drivers and the patients in other rooms. Fifty dead, adults and children alike. They blamed the cause on the carelessness of the very performers who were doing fire experiments, or on the electricians who had assembled such a complex array of lights. They didn't mention the bombs or the threats.
On the night of the surgery, Ernesto went to visit her. He stood beside the bed, took her hand, and wept with her, avoiding looking at her legs, which were like two corpses in metal and plaster coffins.
Edith asked about Archie.
-We don't know anything. You know, his parents and the military must have forced him to wash his hands of everything.
"We can't blame him, can we?" she said, looking at him pale as a martyr.
He shrugged.
"But when he finds out he's having a child, he'll come back. Please, Ernesto, find him and let him know. Dr. Farías needs to know where he is."
Monsieur Lafitte asked him how long he had known.
Edith looked down at the sheets and gripped them tightly with her fists.
-And you didn't tell me anything? And you kept working? Shit, Flora.

Lafitte squeezed his hat until it was almost wrinkled, turned towards the door, and before leaving looked at his legs, not at Edith.
None of this would have happened to you if you had said so.

Knowing that he was repeating the unnecessary, he wanted to add something that had never been said before, but that somehow they both knew for a long time.
None of this would have happened to you if you had married me.

She was bedridden for four months. After the hospital, they took her back to the caravan where she always lived, surrounded by the circus's skeletons, the waterlogged and rotting remains of the tent, the pillars that still stood. All the staff had scattered to other circuses, at least those who weren't killed or injured. Only the two of them remained. The insurance paid for some of the damage, but the investigation, they said, never found any evidence of an attack.
One day the “Gypsies” arrived. Three burly men with long mustaches. They looked at the ruins, and one of them said:
-Well, Lafuente, it was about time you listened to me.
He was right, there was nothing left to do but hand over the weapons and show empty hands.
Colonel Gonzaga didn't appear in person, but they learned of him through the newspapers. He had become engaged to a young lady from high society, Eva Larriere. From a family of funeral home owners, they both had a comfortable life assured, even saving on funeral expenses. Edith read the news of the engagement and subsequent marriage as if she were learning of a war in China. She neither cried nor became hysterical; she simply shrugged.
The casts had been removed, but she still couldn't walk. Her legs were too weak to support the weight of her pregnancy, which wasn't very heavy anyway. The baby was born by cesarean section at seven months. He was malformed, the doctors said, and in the position he was in the womb, he was going to die inside. When she saw him, she told herself it would have been for the best.
She named him Charlie, because the sound reminded her of his father. She hated the boy as much as she had loved his father. She stared at his deformity, which was the exact inversion of the other's beauty. What she hated in one, she loved in the other. And over time, from observing him so much, she was no longer sure which one she was looking at, or whom she loved or hated. Charlie's features were like a monkey's; he even learned to

crawl with his legs bent and his hands resting on the backs of his head instead of his palms. He was very hairy, and at first, he made nothing but guttural sounds.

The circus was re-established under the auspices and strict management of the Gypsies. They had brought in the staff, as well as the new name, so trivial that there are no records of what it might have been, and the shows that were offered.

Edith had learned to play the flute for fun many years before, so she was assigned that role in the circus band. She continued like this for the next two years, touring small towns and villages throughout the province, wherever the owners sent them.

Charlie grew up, and his fellow circus performers laughed at him, saying they'd have to put him on display as a freak show. Edith said nothing. The idea reached the owners, who came to see the boy, who was two or a little older at the time. They thought about putting on a *freak show* , which might boost ticket sales. There was nothing to teach him, just let him walk around like a little animal. In the following weeks, they brought in two amputees and a hydrocephalic child they'd taken from the asylum. During the show, they turned off the lights, played eerie music on a record player, and the little monsters appeared limping or crawling, and another, who had no arms or legs, on a creaking cart. They kept adding more, always abandoned children without families: conjoined twins, children with intellectual disabilities, children with deformities. Those whom nobody wanted at home were at the circus, and there they could be observed with fear and disgust, because when the show was over, each spectator would go back to their normal home, whatever that might be.

When Charlie turned five, he joined the band with his mother. She played the flute in out-of-tune solos, walking as best she could, staggering, sometimes from the alcohol she'd grown accustomed to, other times from the pain of fractures that never fully healed. Behind her came the boy, walking similarly due to the strange stiffness in his legs, bearded almost despite his age, with the characteristic prognathism, and playing the cymbals however he pleased. It wasn't the music, but his outlandish presence that heralded the performance of the *freaks* , which had enjoyed a respectable success for some time, at least in the marginalized and unofficial circuits of the much-vaunted national culture. But nobody cared

about that. The death of the "champion of the humble" had plunged the country into mourning, and the president, as if lost, was adrift, paving the way for the military, once again.
Ernesto Lafuente, no longer Monsieur Lafitte, quit the circus. He had lung cancer—the cigarettes and all that—and two months later he was dead in the hospital. Edith stayed with him the whole time, and no one missed her absence at the circus. When she returned after her friend's funeral, she learned she'd been fired. She asked for a place to sleep; after all, her son worked there. "If you don't work, you don't eat," they told her.
He was left in the street, with only the clothes on his back, and his limp. She went back to being called Flora Romero, of course, and thus began the last stage of her life.

4

For several nights she stayed by the circus, trying to avoid being seen by the new owners. A couple of women, who knew her from the good old days, brought her food and shelter. But Estanislao Krakovsky found out, and one morning he stormed out, cursing furiously and kicking Charlie's backside. The boy didn't cry; he just jumped and moved a meter forward with each kick. Men and women gathered to see what was happening, but none dared contradict the boss. He had long, slicked-back hair, a thick mustache that reached his chin, gold hoops in each ear, necklaces and many rings, a hairy, bare chest, and he was wearing only the long underpants he used to sleep in.
"That idiot shat on me, Flora! He shat on my bed like a dog, worse than a dog! He had to be a son of a bitch!"
No one asked what the boy was doing in his bed; everyone already knew the guy had a thing for the outlandish. The women in the circus knew it, and the men, who consented, knew it too. It was the only way to keep the job going. Otherwise, right there on the floor, in the mud, was Flora, the once exquisite equestrian admired throughout Europe. Or perhaps Charlie

had climbed onto the bed out of curiosity, jumping around like a monkey in his own unique way.
Then Flora pulled aside the dirty blanket she had spent the night under next to the circus tarp, leaned over looking at her son who was stirring the mud with his hands and eyes clouded with confusion, because he didn't know how to express the pain, the poor son of a bitch, he wasn't even capable of that.
"You know him," she said. "He's a harmless little monster. Do you want me to come in and clean the sheets and mattress?"
Those who heard her were unaware of the sarcastic streak that had surfaced in Flora at that moment. She was either submissive and sad, or cheerful and naive. Now she had different eyes, in which Charlie's image was reflected in her pupils, sitting there with his butt sticking out, drawing something in the mud.
Krakovsky must have thought she was serious, and he even seemed hesitant for a few moments. Perhaps he believed she was willing to let herself be taken so he would accept her back into the circus, but to those who knew her, her tone spoke of something else entirely: a kind of wounded dignity, blasphemed pride, and above all, growing anger.
"Go move out of here, you idiot! And take that shitty kid with you! There are plenty of monsters around!"
She turned around and disappeared behind the tarp, which from then on was like an iron curtain for Flora and Charlie. Some stayed behind to help her pack scraps of food and old clothes into a burlap sack. They cleaned the boy in the harsh winter air, naked, to wash his hairy body where grime was caked. Then they watched them walk away toward the Matanza River. She carried the sack on one shoulder and held the boy's hand with the other; he walked slowly and laboriously.

They followed the riverbank south. In Barracas, he stayed in several boarding houses or rooms that were rented to him for just one night, because nobody could stand the smell of Charlie's body, and even less his screams when he got angry or fussy.
"Why don't I throw it in the river?" she said to him several times during those days, as they stared at the murky surface of the water. He listened to her with a strange rapt attention, as if he understood her, but she knew that he had never understood anything since he was born.

Sleeping outdoors wasn't the worst part; it was the hunger. She had no choice but to be persuaded by a woman from Barracas, who helped her cross the Riachuelo River with her child, bag, and the clothes on her back. "You're not very pretty, girl, but there are always guys who don't care more than that you have a nice pussy and a passable ass," he told her, as they walked along the cobblestones towards Mataderos.

At a two-story boarding house, with balconies overflowing with geraniums and laundry hanging out to dry, they stopped, it was already night. A prostitute in a bathrobe, her hair wet, opened the door. The old woman introduced her. The other woman looked Flora up and down, and then at the boy hiding behind her skirt.

"And this is what you've brought me?" he said to the old woman.

What do you want? If you want models, go to the movies. Besides, I felt sorry for her, what can I say?

Flora listened and waited.

"And do you know about this?" the young woman asked, always at the door, with the light from the long hallway weak and dim.

Flora simply clicked her tongue and pointed at the boy.

"I can imagine. You wasted time thinking about it too much. This doesn't happen here, kid. Rosa and I, my godmother," she said, pointing at the old woman, "we'll take care of getting them all out."

She lived in the boarding house everyone knew as the seedy and notorious brothel in the Mataderos neighborhood. All the teenagers who wanted to lose their virginity went there, and when they returned home, after their mothers' lectures, they were forced to bathe and scrub themselves thoroughly to remove the diseases they had surely caught. The men were factory or construction workers, some office workers who tried to go unnoticed with their heads down as they entered, but they were usually the worst, the women said. "May God protect you from the timid and the quiet," they would tell Flora.

There were other children living there. They slept in a second-floor room that overlooked the backyard. They were used to the household routine and kept quiet when necessary. But when they saw Charlie, they backed away and covered their mouths. He looked at them silently, accustomed to the audience's reaction at the circus. Then they circled around him, watching him. One dared to touch him and pushed him. Charlie easily lost his

balance and fell face-first to the ground. They laughed, and in that, both sides found the necessary way to coexist.

The way he behaved was as if he understood that their shelter and food depended on it, and Flora saw in Charlie's cow-like eyes a semblance of intelligence. But wasn't that going too far? Charlie spoke only in groans and a kind of murmur of discontent. His shouts, which were like the off-key singing of a countertenor, he had kept to himself since they'd been at the boarding house.

During the day she dressed like an ordinary housewife, trying to blend in at the neighborhood stores, but the boy sometimes followed her, and then she could no longer hide that it was her son, that thing, that little animal that sometimes crawled and other times jumped. She saw the faces of the women on the sidewalks, the women sweeping or mopping, cursing the whore who paraded the fruit of her sins through the streets. And Flora, knowing the stigma branded on her body, began to revel in it, and spat on the broken tiles that the others had just cleaned. Once, the poor boy, the poor beast, even pulled down his pants and defecated on the sidewalk like a dog, while his mother held his hand, smiling and smoking in defiance of the mouths that insulted her.

There were nights when no one entered the brothel, sometimes just one man, or two at most. Bad times for an uncertain era of unpredictable politics. Perón was being overwhelmed by his own legend, and the opposition was growing. The military spoke on the radio, and she, lying in bed, waiting for a man who never came, remembered Archibald, and it was like listening to him on the radio. And in all those speeches, which led nowhere, where everything was criticism and promise, where the rifles were like long stems of dead roses, she found a renewal of her feelings.

The transition period continued, but the results were becoming clear. Charlie was a monster, because he was his, that is to say, his own. The war rhetoric, the threats to the people, the danger that stalked the workers, came from a mouth with clean, healthy teeth, but they had been born from the spirit of men like Colonel Gonzaga.

Charlie was its seed. A monster like the society that was being born—not a society anymore, but a debacle and chaos. Uncertainty as the norm, ignorance as an instrument of knowledge, violence as the method. When she saw him enter her room, very early in the morning, when the night had

taken the men away as she herself had seen it take them in her mother's shack by the Matanza River, she saw in Charlie the wisdom of the ignorant, of those who know everything without anyone having taught them. The fatalism in little Flora's soul was the same she saw in her son's eyes. But there was no beauty, not even the slightest harmony. Gonzaga had provided the body, that is, the flesh that decays and rots. He had contributed, in that society that constructed an undefined and sterile entity, the concordance of body and soul. Charlie was a monster who would live, who might speak someday, who might reason intelligently, perhaps, with the objective of killing. And that was the only way to get rid of the anger: the imperishable revenge that at the time neither of them believed to be imperishable: he because his martyrdom was just beginning, she because it had arrived too late and she had no strength.
She realized this a few nights later, observing the man beside her in bed. The most beautiful man her eyes had ever seen.

Colonel Gonzaga had married a Larriere; he was no longer simply a colonel, but a lieutenant colonel in the army. He had read and heard about the tragedy at the circus in Buenos Aires, but he was with his wife on their long honeymoon through Europe and the Orient. A gift from his in-laws, of course, but the Gonzagas had contributed the house and the land in San Isidro. From the Jockey Club to the Hippodrome, there was only one step for the Chevrolet he drove, because Eva had another for herself and her business, more formal, black, and austere. Eva was a remarkable woman, not only astute in business, but with an intuition he never quite grasped, because she spoke to him of death, the very object of her family business, as if it were a future event. When she embraced him, he felt a sorrow similar to when he had first seen Flora ride her black colt. As if they were both messengers; But it wasn't so, it was said in the days following the wedding, smoking in bed next to the woman who, after making love, primped and dressed as if for a funeral, and that it was simply a night's rest. Flora carried death within her, but Eve was a mediator, perhaps it would be more accurate to say, the merchant of death.
That's why, two, three, four years later, when César was already born and running around the park, he would take him to lunches at the Club, sometimes even to the Hotel Castelar to proudly show him off to the other

men who came in and out of the sauna, greeting Archie's little boy, beautiful like his father, with a manly high-five. And whenever he could, after work at the Military Circle, which took him longer than the paperwork at the law firm, he would go for a drink with the guys. Sometimes on Fridays, always on Saturdays, and later on any day of the week, except Sundays, which were reserved for his family and his in-laws' family.
And one of those nights I was in a cabaret on Avenida de Mayo, in the lower part of town. Very dim lights, if there were any at all, dimmed the dance floors where the strippers came and went, without any tasteless swaying, without clothes, of course, just a very fine pair of panties that the owner imported from Russia, because there they knew how to seduce, how to flirt with women, how to convince them of a man's attractiveness, whoever he might be. The French Finns were a tasteless whorehouse, adorned with fake gold and obsequious words to hide the effeminacy of deformed and cowardly men.
Drunk, sure, but not so drunk that he couldn't sit some girl on his lap and feel her buttocks settle against his thigh, like riding him. And he didn't know why, but whenever he thought about it, he remembered Flora. What had become of her? She'd even avoided saying goodbye that time, just the day before the fire . They'd said something to her, of course, the thugs from Krakovsky, and his old man had called him, too. Both coincidences had collided to say nothing, and to say the same nothing. In the derangement his mind had become lately, the silence of so many words together could be translated as: *go away, Archie, he's gotten his kicks, Colonel, he's played the pimp and the benefactor however he damn well pleased, wipe your dick, kid, and get the hell out of here.*

The country awaits Lieutenant Colonel Archibaldo Gonzaga.
But no one had forbidden him from having a few wild nights whenever he wanted. So, half-drunk and half-cheerful—because in him, those two states were often a contradiction that overwhelmed, confused, and exhausted him—he left the dive bar and stepped onto the sidewalk, deserted at that hour of the night. He missed his friend Dr. Farías, his close friend, sometimes more than close, who understood his soul with hardly a word, just by looking into each other's eyes or embracing in those hypnotic states after the alcohol and before sleep. But the doctor was campaigning to be

appointed Minister of Public Health, and so he only made himself known during the day and in public and family settings.
He was alone, then, and he didn't mind being by his own side, embarrassing himself without anyone seeing him, giving himself the *mea culpas* he'd learned in catechism. That reminded him he needed to urinate, so he faced a shop window and sprayed his stream against the glass while the female mannequins watched impassively, without scandal. He'd find a prostitute, he told himself; the ones at the cabaret were prudes. He'd find one on the street, a woman in need of money who would do whatever he asked. He'd split her in two, he thought, ending up with his testicles drained and the woman smeared with his seed like one of those oriental goddesses whose statuettes he'd seen on his honeymoon.
He walked around, searching, but none of the women he found appealed to him. He was looking for something he didn't know, for a woman who resembled the one he was seeking, without having any idea what that was.
He took a taxi.
-Do you know, boss, where there's a decent brothel?
He rolled down the window, letting in the cold air and exhaling cigarette smoke.
-It depends on how much you want to spend, boss.
-As little as possible, all seashells are the same, aren't they?
The driver laughed.
They drove through many streets and several neighborhoods, each one poorer than the last. The taxi meter kept going up, and the driver must have been wondering if the guy was going to pay.
-Boss, excuse me for saying this, but it's late, and by looking for a cheap whore, you're spending more on the trip than two or three of the expensive ones would cost.
Gonzaga looked at him in the rearview mirror, hiding behind the smoke.
-Stop here.

They were in Mataderos. There was a small red lantern at the door of a boarding house. He looked at the bill, took the bills out of his pocket, and carefully placed them in the rear end of the stuffed animal hanging from the back of the front seat. He got out of the car; the driver, somewhat annoyed, did too, but he gave up when Gonzaga said:

-Keep the change, you'll have more than enough to do some maintenance on this coffee maker.
He walked to the brothel and rang the bell. The peephole shone a beam of light on him, along with the smell of camphor. What am I getting myself into, he thought.
Hallway, a table with an old whore sitting on it, flabby legs and dirty tits.
"Wait over there," he told her, pointing to the small room with four or five chairs.
He sat down, staring at the ceiling, its paint peeling and covered in damp patches. It was four in the morning; anyone who had come had already left.
"Go up to the first floor, the first room," the girl shouted a while later.
He did as he was told, tired but not so drunk anymore. The taxi ride and the cold air through the window had sobered him up. He didn't knock before entering. In the dark bed, next to a nightstand that looked more like something you'd find at a wake, lay a woman. She was small, judging by the space she took up on the bed, thin, rather scrawny.
"Excuse me," he said, and heard a shout that denoted surprise.
-Archie…
Flora's voice swept away what remained of her name that night.

He lay down beside her, speechless with astonishment, truly stunned to find her there, her of all people, by God, whom he couldn't even look in the face, because she had left without saying goodbye, without even visiting him in the hospital. He had gotten rid of her like someone throwing a piece of paper in the trash and covering it with so many other things so as never to see it again: marriage, travel, work, and above all, indifference. But there she was, Flora, or Edith, the one he had truly fallen in love with, the equestrian riding across the empty grounds adjacent to the airport, on a black horse that couldn't fly, only skim the ground, collecting the remains of skeletons.
There she was, a survivor on a strange bed she'd made her own out of necessity, the mother of habit. It was a good thing she was only a shadow for now, because he didn't dare look her in the face.
"Aren't you going to get naked?" she asked.
Her tone was different, but it was the same voice. A rough tone, a high-pitched voice. Edith playing the flute on horseback, circling the circus ring.

How many times had he seen her like that, in that image with sexual connotations he couldn't shake, just as none of the adults who had ever seen her could. Innocence was a label that sang her name and her face, as if she didn't know the longing she provoked, she, so fragile, so "dead fly," as the other women called her, she who, without wanting it and without the proper figure, incited desire as only an ideal can, unattainable yet essential. Without her, the others were nothing more than fertile bodies, like the earth beneath their feet. The earth dries up and turns to dust, but the winged figure riding, always riding close to the ground but without touching it, in that indefinable space that determined the absolute difference. Neither air nor earth, perhaps water swirling in space against all physics and logic. Or the feather of its crepe paper, perhaps sweeping away all possible existence in its abyss.

He took off his clothes. He lay down on top of her. The smell of the circus surrounded him like invisible hands that caressed and squeezed him. Flora was now looking into his eyes, and it wasn't love or selflessness or joy or even satisfaction. It was a resentment that hurt her face, and he could only do what a man does when he can't answer: he lunged at her, penetrating her to observe her pained face, which is pleasure and pain, and both, hatred and love confused for an instant. She didn't smile or close her eyes; Flora was no longer riding him. Her legs were two parentheses enclosing the body of a man, or the body of monsters.

When he finished, he held her face with one hand, squeezing it, knowing the damage he was doing.

"What's wrong with you, Flora? I look at you and you're not yourself anymore. You weren't a whore, and now you're acting like one."

-Who says I wasn't a whore? I've been one since I was a little girl.

She couldn't recall having thought about all of that in detail for so many years. What Ernesto knew, she had kept to herself, and she maintained the silence that was the most beautiful thing in a man's mouth. Yet today, unexpectedly, that night, it was seeping out from the folds of her mind. The poorly plastered, broken walls of her mind.

-Don't you want to meet your son?

He looked at her, let go of her, and threw himself on the bed, tired.

-Don't give me that, you learned the whole whore's handbook...

Flora laughed.

"They shoved the manual up my ass, darling, when I was a little girl. But it doesn't matter anymore. What I'm telling you is true. The boy sleeps upstairs."

-But…

"When you left I was already pregnant, I didn't tell anyone. I was three months along when the accident happened. That kid's a moron, and I'm more disfigured than shit. This is all I'm good for, lying face up like a dead woman and taking the stake that, for a while, frees me from hell."

He got up and put on his pants.

-Upstairs, you say?

He stepped out into the dark hallway, though the light of dawn was trying to peek through the windows. He went upstairs and opened the only door. By the light of a stove, there were several mattresses and boys sleeping half-naked.

"That one," said Flora, behind him, stretching out her arm.

She was different now, small, gently touching his elbow to guide him in the dim light.

He made him crouch down. He heard a snore like a sick animal. He frowned, trying to silently ask Flora what it was all about, whether it was a joke or some kind of tasteless revenge .

Flora approached the boy, or whatever he was, because he was snoring or whimpering like a wounded dog, and said:

-Charlie, wake up, here is your father, my dear, my perfect little angel, my sweet, innocent, and fragile little animal, angel of God, worthy son of your father, the blessed seed of goodness and beauty…

When he was about to silence her to stop that spiteful and obsessive outburst, she said to him:

-Look at him for a bit, and tell me if he doesn't look like you.

It was a creature of indeterminate age, with a face marked by prognathism, long arms, bent legs, and covered in hair. Was that his son?

He grabbed Flora by the arm and covered her mouth. They went back downstairs to the room.

"Are you alright, Flora?" the old woman shouted from downstairs; she had heard the footsteps and the doors.

-Yes, Rosa, don't worry.

Archibald had her pinned against the bed, his body on top of her, his fury exacerbated.
"What a nice joke you're trying to play on me. You weren't like this before. Did the accident change you that much?" he said, poking one of her temples with the tip of a finger as if trying to find the entrance to Flora's brain.
"An accident? Call it what you want," they told me, adding that you knew something about it, but that's old news. What changed me, my dear, was you. You left, you left me with a son…
-I did not know…
"I know you didn't know, I don't blame you for that, but for the escape. You found out about the fire and what happened to Edith the equestrian. You didn't come to visit me, Archie..."
She wasn't crying, of course. It was a complaint, a reproach. It was, in fact, an accusation.
Gonzaga got out of bed. He put on his shirt and jacket, and hung the tie he had taken off since arriving at the cabaret around his neck.
-Are you leaving already?
-What do you want from me, Flora? What's the point of this, if you didn't even know I was coming, that we were going to meet?
"But it happened, Archie. Ernesto's mother, remember I told you about her? She was a great witch, very wise. I learned from her that events are out of our hands. She put on a puppet show and controlled almost all the puppets. We, she told me, don't control anything, but we see the strings that move men. Higher up are the hands that direct those strings, and higher still, the unknown. You came for a reason, Archie."
-I came because I'm an idiot, a horny guy who can't stay calm with his wife and little boy at home.
-You must have a son, a very beautiful one, Archie.
-Of course, Flora, not that monstrosity you had.
Flora didn't know why she did what she did; perhaps Marietta did. She, who hated the boy, suddenly found herself grabbing the lamp from the bedside table, plunging the room into darkness, and throwing it at Gonzaga's head.
There was a sound of breaking glass and a muffled scream.
"Fucking hell!" he said.

"What's going on upstairs?" the old woman shouted from below.
-Nothing, we'll play, nothing, don't worry.
-They'll pay for what they break.
Gonzaga walked toward the bed in the dark, stumbling over the fallen sheet and stubbing his bare foot against one of the legs. He clutched his injured head; shards of glass were in his hair. Flora huddled against the headboard; Archie's silence both missed her and frightened her. She felt his hands on her shoulders, pressing her against the wall, then he touched her breasts and her stomach, where the cesarean scar remained.
-You're a deformed whore. Thank goodness I don't have a gun to shoot you.
"You'd be doing me a favor, Archie," she said, but she didn't cry.
Perhaps, if she had done so, the web of events that night would have unraveled on its own. However, the architecture of the tragedy remained intact.
He took the tie and wrapped it around Flora's neck. It was silky, extremely soft. Italian silk, perhaps bought in Naples. He hesitated for a moment, but began to adjust it around Flora's neck.
She felt death's hands so gentle that she slowly drifted off to sleep, with Archibald's breath on her face, the scent of tobacco and the smell of the colt she had ridden, the smell of Matanza and the sawdust from the circus. All of that together, even though she could no longer breathe, was a soft amalgam, like crepe paper that had vanished forever.
The darkness of the room was the last thing she saw, and the subsequent darkness did not surprise her.

5

Archibald Gonzaga looked at the ceiling. The cobwebs fluttered with the sound of footsteps on the stairs. Then, knocks on the door.
-Are you finished, Flora?
He didn't answer, but he had to.
-She's asleep, ma'am.

-Okay, but I don't want any customers here after six o'clock, so please get dressed and leave.
The clock on the bedside table was dead. The wristwatch read five minutes to five.
-Okay, ma'am... I'm coming down.
He knew that upon returning to reality, after that interval where there was no time, where it was only the two of them, or rather him and his anger, or whatever that uncertain and feelingless thing that was him, Gonzaga, was called when he tied the tie around Flora's neck, despair would take its place, arrogant and exclusive.
He put his hands to his head, rubbed his hair and beard with his nails, asking himself over and over, "What do I do now?" If he went out as if nothing had happened, the old woman would soon find Flora dead and know it was him. Even if he didn't know her name, faces are never forgotten.
And then he thought of his friend Farías. Marco would come out of his seclusion to help him, of that there was no doubt, even though he would later collect the favor many times over.
He went down to the ground floor.
-Excuse me, ma'am, I need to make a call so a friend can come pick me up, can I borrow your phone?
The woman pointed to the small three-legged table against the hallway wall. Gonzaga took the few steps, picked up the receiver, dialed the number, and waited for Farías to be awake or at least hear the phone ring.
The old woman looked up the hallway, then back at him, and asked:
-Is he still sleeping?
While pleading to hear Marco's voice, she replied:
-Yes, old lady, what can you do? We get a little tired, you know.
The woman swore and continued listening to the radio with her ear pressed against the speaker.
Finally, Dr. Farías answered. He whispered what had happened: "No, no, I can't talk anymore. Please, Marco, do what I ask, for the love of God." He knew he was about to cry. He was thinking of his wife, his house, his job, his son. No, not that little monster on the second floor, but César, the one who was waiting for them to go for their usual afternoon walk along the San Isidro Ravines.

"He'll be here soon," he said, hanging up the tube, smiling at the old woman, and went back upstairs to the room, locking the door.

He anxiously counted the minutes at first. After a quarter of an hour, his nerves threatened to betray him. Flora was in the same position, leaning against the back of the chair, her head drooping to the left. He took off her tie and put it in his pocket.

After half an hour, desperation made him pace back and forth in the room, knowing that he was making noise on the floorboards, but the old woman had her ear glued to the radio, it was impossible for her to hear, he told himself, it had to be like this, until Farías arrived.

He glanced again at the clock on the table, its hands frozen at four-thirty. Wasn't that the time he'd tightened his tie? But then… No, he told himself, the clock hadn't worked since who knows when. Four in the afternoon or sometime in the dawn of a "sometime" lost in time. Flora's face, half-hidden in the hollow of his shoulder, seemed asleep, nothing more, and soon he would see her open an eye, treacherous, malicious, mocking. She who knew how to ride colts moaning with ecstasy and giving birth to monsters. The equestrian with ancestors rooted in old Brittany, the land of witches celebrating their sabbaths in forest clearings between midnight and the first light of dawn. Perhaps four-thirty in the morning.

Then he wondered if what he had done was nothing more than freeing the spirit locked in that woman's small body, the great spirit that only manifested itself in those moments of ecstasy, like when he had seen her riding in the fields of Ezeiza.

It was she who was probably delaying Farías' arrival, getting in his way, making him stumble, perhaps even causing an accident.

When he looked at his wristwatch, he saw it was six in the morning, and he heard the first footsteps on the stairs. He would lock himself in his room, tie his necktie around his neck, then on some beam, hook, even a screw or nail sticking out of the ceiling, and hang himself, rather than face the shame of the future.

But then there was a loud knocking at the front door. The old woman's heels clicked down again to see who was knocking. There were shouts, doors being slammed, and the hurried footsteps of men's boots. Men's voices, and among them that of Dr. Farías, saying:

-Ma'am, please step aside. This is an inspection by the Health Department. We've received many complaints, ma'am, about what's going on in here.
A clap of hands represented the old woman's reaction, saying "not this again."
I could kiss and hug you right now, my dear friend, Gonzaga thought, thrilled by this brilliant idea. Dr. Farías, the future Minister of Health, had come to save him with a perfectly legal stratagem. The triumph, my dear, is ours, he told himself. Flora, from the darkness, was perhaps smiling too.
Farías's men, four or five judging by their footsteps, roamed the hallways and stairwells, opening doors and bringing out the women who, now awake, wondered what was happening, until they resignedly realized the urban ritual they had to perform. Some in corsets, others in dressing gowns, they talked and mocked the men, while Rosa stood in the way of the staircase leading to the next floor.
-There are the boys, that's all.
The men looked at Farías, who waited with his arms crossed by the dining room table, which was littered with ashtrays and cigarette butts, glasses and bottles. He shook his head, and his men then set about searching the rooms, turning the beds over, taking clothes out of the closets, until they found the closed door where he was.
He opened the door, buttoning his pants, and apologizing as if he didn't know anyone. They grabbed his arms and dragged him downstairs. He saw the others enter the room, rummage through things, throw things around, break things, and leave, just as they had left the other rooms, carrying bags of evidence: some sheets stained with semen, others containing knives, a revolver, surely, lots of creams and oils, makeup tubes, dildos, ropes, pornographic photos, and old cameras. And in one of those bags, no bigger than the others, because his body was small and thin, and light as the crepe he had worn, was Flora's body, and much of her clothing, and her suitcase, too, because those men forgot nothing, experts in death and its fictions.
There were two cars and a truck in the street, into which they threw all the things they had taken from the brothel. They got into one of the cars, in the back seat. Two of the men were in the front, pistols on the dashboard.
-Thank you, Marco.
-Thank my brother Hermes, who lent me these guys.

Did you tell him?
"Only from the closure of a brothel, and he agreed to make amends. He's the black sheep of the Farías family, you know? Or rather, the white sheep."
They wandered through several streets, circling as if trying to lose their trail, but it's well known that they were both pursued and pursuers, as if trying to erase their tracks in a kind of endless circle. Curious, isn't it? That metaphor for hell on earth.
"So what do we do now?" Farías asked him. "What a mess you made, man!"
"What do you want? That bitch was trying to blackmail me with some mentally challenged kid or something. You should have seen him... She was telling me it was my fault, that she got kicked out of the circus because of that monstrosity I made for her. That I disappeared and abandoned her, that I stole all the money from her tours..."
Did he believe all that? Marco, who knew him, put a hand over his mouth, pointing at the others in the rearview mirror. It was better to keep quiet. The lies you make up are more dangerous than the ones you hear.
Then Gonzaga said:
-To the slaughterhouse, we're very close.
Marco looked at him without saying anything.

Colonel Gonzaga knew the orderly; he had spoken with him many times during the campaign he had waged to appoint a military man as director—a man who wanted to curry favor to become a general, even though he wasn't cut out for it. While they let him dream, they had given him that position to keep him occupied.
They arrived. Gonzaga got out, appropriately disheveled after a night of revelry. He approached the gate and knocked.
It was about six thirty. The men were already at work.
"Colonel, what a pleasure!" said the young man with a thick beard.
-Oscar, old man, listen to me. I need a small favor…
The boy looked towards the truck and the cars.
-For you, my colonel, anything you want.
It didn't hurt to grease his palm with banknotes, in addition to the position he had placed him in.
The men unloaded bundles, just a few, to disguise their presence. Then the truck and the other car left. The boy took charge of choosing the bag, as if

inspecting it meticulously and seriously. He smelled, perhaps, the smell of death. Gonzaga knew him; the kid shifted with the winds of political circumstances and according to the favor of many heavyweights in the Circle. The Saravias had recommended him. Afterward, he left them alone in a damp, empty warehouse, far from the men who worked. The smell of grease and rotting meat clung to the walls, as if they were made of bones freshly peeled by efficient scavengers.

Flora's body lay inside the sheet, on the cement floor. There were cabinets along the sides and shelves on the walls, all grimy and devoid of tools. Archie searched the cabinets; he knew what he was looking for, but wasn't sure he'd find it.

"What are you looking for?" Marco asked.

-An axe, a saw, my brother. What do you want me to look for in this hell?

-A cold hell, brother, as you say, because it's a refrigerator right now.

Both of them trembled uncontrollably, with chills that made their teeth chatter and slurred their words, which froze in the air before being spoken.

-I chose.

Gonzaga held an axe in one hand and a bone saw in the other.

-Or don't you want to get your hands dirty, future minister?

Who was Archibaldo Gonzaga? Farías must have been wondering. That sneer of disdain, that threat, was etched on his face, like tiny freckles dotting his blue eyes, like a darkened sky. His voice trembled, his hands holding the tools-weapons trembled. His white shirt was sweaty and dirty, his trousers had a torn pocket.

"Give it to me," Farías said, choosing the axe. If he was going to do it, at least let it be with fury, allowing him to unleash his anger with the blows.

How to begin? Not where, but how.

Dropping the axe wherever chance decided.

Dismembering a body, just like those other men were doing in the other rooms of the municipal slaughterhouse. But this body they were working on was so small that they would soon finish.

Three, four axe blows that separated the head from the thorax, then the abdomen and split the pelvis in two.

Half the job was already done.

Gonzaga bent over the remains, wiping the blood that had spattered his clothes and face. Farías dried himself with his shirtsleeves. Blood, sweat,

and tears, like in war, as someone very famous said, and Archie laughed at that association, as sarcastic as a joke from God, present there, in the flesh he so enjoyed lacerating and making suffer.
Saw in hand, he spread her arms at the shoulders, then her elbows, and finally her hands that had once held the reins of a docile colt. He cut through her hips, strong, perhaps the firmest part of Flora's body, the ones that had supported her on their backs and kept her upright on the long rides around the circus ring. Her knees were so difficult to saw that he almost burst into tears himself, like that imbecile Farías. But he held back, and touched her feet. He had kissed them many times, and now the pale skin was stained with blood as he cut them.
Everything was reduced to a mound of flesh and bones, on which they rested their heads, and covered it with the sheet.
They called Oscar.
"For the dogs," said Gonzaga, the saw stuck to his hand with dried blood.
The boy laughed, but said he would take care of putting everything in the truck that was taking the remains to the crematorium.
-Do whatever you want.
They went to the bathrooms, the ones the workers used at the end of the day. The sound of axes continued in the courtyards, along with the shouts and cheerful curses of the men.
They undressed and squatted over the old, ancient latrines, above which the water from the taps fell, sometimes strong, sometimes just a trickle, but always cold.
They rubbed their blood together, shivering with cold, grimacing ridiculously, cursing the same God who had given them the water and the meat, the wine and the bread of that little apocalypse they had been creating on Flora's body.
And from the intense cold, Archibaldo huddled his arms around himself. His backside pressed against the old tiles, he tried to rid himself of the filth that clung to his body, which no longer responded. And as he wept, Marco, out of sheer fear, approached him and wrapped his arms around him.
They tried to keep each other warm , but the cold reigned like a despot preparing for the next massacre.

Around noon, at the boarding house, the young owner of the brothel was complaining a lot to Rosa, the one who performed abortions in the neighborhood, and didn't charge much.
-I left you in charge once, and look what happened!
"And what's it to me, if you please? They'll reopen you in two days, you know how they are, all show for the press."
-And on top of that, Flora left us, and she left the idiot.
Rosa crossed her arms, also surprised by that, but with all the commotion that morning, she hadn't seen her, and it wasn't unusual for her to run away with so many soldiers around. But she would take Charlie with her, and raise him to teach him the trade.
And if he didn't learn it, what did it matter? Women, just by seeing him, would have abortions out of horror.

PROFOUND EXALTATIONS

1

I will tell my story as if I were the protagonist, but in reality, the main character is Andrés Funes. I met him in Dolores when we were children. I don't remember when our friendship began; perhaps it was in that very early stage of childhood when memories become confused and reality merges with feelings.

By the way, my name is Juan Carlos, Juanca to everyone. But my ID clearly says Gian Carlo Voltoretá. That's what I was christened, because my father was a true Italian, a Milanese who came to Argentina with my grandfather, fleeing Mussolini, back in the forties. Without a mother, because my grandmother had been executed for being an anarchist, my grandfather, Lautaro Voltoretá, came by ship, as a stowaway, as he told it, with his son in his arms, wrapped in blankets and on top of that a goatskin waterproof against the sea air and rain. He got off the ship in the port of Buenos Aires, during Perón's presidency. He opened a shoe store in the La Boca neighborhood, and while he didn't become a millionaire, he was able to pay for my father's schooling. Father and son were both loved and hated in the neighborhood near the port. Too enterprising and concerned, too responsible, we'd say today, for a job well done. Dad wanted to help him as a shoemaker's apprentice, but before the old man could convince him otherwise, he died of a heart attack right there at work, sitting in his usual chair with a boot on his lap, clutching it to his chest when the pain started. The boot was his accomplice in his attempt not to worry the boy beside him, gluing soles. A boy who was now a man, and who didn't want to be a shoemaker, but a musician, captivated by the syncopated rhythm of the

shoemaking machines, interwoven with the tangos and Italian canzonettas his grandfather listened to on the radio. But Dad hadn't said a word, even though his grandfather knew it very well and encouraged him by singing with his broken, untrained baritone voice on Saturday afternoons, when his son helped him in the workshop.

As I was saying, Grandpa died of a heart attack, and when my father heard the silence of the empty workshop, filled with broken, half-repaired shoes, he felt such tremendous anguish that he wanted to vomit at the sight of so much filth and desolation. It was as if the smell of all those people's dirty feet, which he had never noticed, suddenly and irrevocably overwhelmed him. He then sold the entire workshop, along with all its clientele, to an old Italian friend of Grandpa's who, rather than loving him, had envied his prosperity, or rather, that unwavering and insidious will that brought more prestige to the small Voltoretá family in the neighborhood than any real progress.

With that small amount of money, he went to live with a school friend in San Telmo, on a cobblestone street near a conservatory. My father, Nicola, knew Italian and several dialects that my grandfather spoke without any intention of teaching. My father had a prodigious auditory memory, in addition to his exquisite ear. He could repeat lyrics and melodies after hearing them only once, and it was when he started writing them down in his school notebook that my grandfather realized his son's talent: he had transcribed the notes without a staff, knowing nothing more than the solfège he had learned in elementary school.

By twenty-five, he already had songs sold to two record labels and had appeared on radio and television. He didn't sing; his voice was terrible, but he played piano, accompanying soloists who were becoming increasingly well-known. He made a name for himself, and people asked him for songs: mostly ballads, with a recognizable Mediterranean influence, which bothered some people for being pretentious or foreign, but which the public demanded. There was something, however, that always troubled him: not being able to compose for the general public, what he called the discerning audience, music lacking danceable rhythms but full of harmonies. He would have liked to be a Creole Mozart, but they wouldn't let him be. The truth is, perhaps he never even tried.

Because he met my mother in a bar where he played. She was an engineer and a professor at the University of Buenos Aires. She was young, a year or two older than him, smoked, and wore trousers and dark glasses even inside that bar on Corrientes Street in the lower part of town. He mistook her for a prostitute, he used to tell his friends, and even some not so much. He left the piano, approached the table where she was sitting alone, and just like that, like a horny Italian, hairy-chested and with a sparse beard. The story goes that she took off her glasses, looked at him with those black eyes in her face shadowed by the dimness of the dive at midnight, and said to him: “You play wickedly well, darling.” They went to bed, and from there to marriage, and then I was born.

I never imagined my mother that way; it seemed more like a legend they invented to win over the audience of musicians and artists who visited them when they lived in Buenos Aires. My mother was a serious professor, but she used to smoke and drink too much at those gatherings, where if a university student arrived, she would greet him like a close friend. At first, after moving to Dolores, that aspect of my mother frightened me, but I learned to understand that she freed herself from her numerical, structural, and methodological constraints with that behavior, which, to anyone who hadn't known her at the university, was just like that of any ordinary woman. From her, I learned my profession: architect. But from my father, I inherited my passion for music. By day , architecture school in La Plata; by night, conservatory.

Back in Dolores, far from the major commercial centers, they had to travel by bus, train, and borrowed cars. They moved there right after I was born. What was the reason, considering that both the academic and artistic spheres were in Buenos Aires? I was six years old when I asked my mother; I remember because it was my first day of school. Although I didn't fully understand it at the time, I knew that my father, a staunch leftist, was on the military's blacklist.

Was Dolores really such a remote and forgotten place? That wasn't the reason for choosing it, but rather the neglect that befalls those old, albeit venerable, towns of the province. Or perhaps it was his connection to an old-school colonel who had advised him to keep a low profile. He published many songs from afar for the rest of his life, under the pseudonym Nicolás Montalto, my grandmother's surname. While we lived in Dolores, officially

my father was an amateur pianist and a neighborhood grocer. My mother left her professorship at the university and began teaching at a secondary school. She received commissions from abroad, as well as from within the country, for many projects. She designed in her workshop and on the large drawing board, covered in formulas and numbers. If we lacked nothing, it was thanks to her.
My father's songs were forgotten, perhaps because there was an unspoken decree against sharing them, even though they spoke of teenage romances and broken hearts. His music began to be labeled decadent and trivial. This not only saddened him but overwhelmed him, relegating him to the realm of literary café gatherings where bad poets abused their skillful hands on the keyboard. How many melodies were uselessly born and died on those Saturday afternoons, I often say to myself, sitting before a musical staff, designing the architecture of a music that aspires to be both a refuge and a temple of veneration. Inside, the sound waves of an organ reverberate between the walls and the high ceilings, and outside, the thunderous rhythms of military marches slowly disassemble to reform with new figures, the war always changing, the threat disguised, and as a result, the roar and the silence, more fearsome than the noise. The silence pregnant with fear.

Andrés and I were neighborhood friends. He lived with his parents in an old, dilapidated, damp house. His father was a master builder, so he came to our house often for the jobs my mother gave him. His mother, well, I think, just a housewife. She had worked as a maid, then as a waitress in many local bars, and that's how she knew my father; she'd hear him play the piano while waiting tables. All that's old news, things my mother told me. To clear her head, which was full of numerical puzzles, she'd go to those same bars when my father played, and she'd spoken with Andrés's mother. When she told me all this, she'd make a kind of involuntary, interrupted exit, as if she were about to let slip a secret she'd promised to keep hidden. But it wasn't quite like that either, I told myself, thinking about it much later: it sounded more like a kind of regret for having let slip, just once and who knows when, something that wasn't right to reveal. Had I heard her, when I was seven, on those melancholy afternoons in Dolores? She must have realized I had heard her, but I couldn't dig for fear of giving it all away.

Yes, that must have remained dormant in my memory, buzzing around like a green fly, until it finally surfaced when Andrés told me everything when we were teenagers, several years later. The afternoon we got off the bus, sat down on a park bench, and he told me, crying, how his parents used him as a witness, and then as a participant.

Andrés was thin, even thinner than I was back then. It was later that he gained weight and muscle. At fourteen, he wasn't taller than me, but he was more muscular, with a round face and facial hair that wasn't quite a beard yet, because blond boys like him aren't usually very hairy. I, on the other hand, with my Italian features and thick mustache, was his shadow, thin and dark-skinned, half Greek, they said, half Sicilian. I mixed in slang to try to act tough, but Andrés was shy and quiet. If he told me everything that afternoon in the plaza, it was because it was the first time he'd ever been amazed by his own body, the source of his guilt.

The night before, he'd seen his parents in bed and had masturbated, but when he told me, I didn't know whether to laugh or just tease him, because it hadn't even been that; it had been a teenage ejaculation, something I'd known about for a while, even though back then parents and children didn't talk about those things. Then I kept quiet and listened to him carefully.

It wasn't the first time. They would call him to his room. They would see him hide behind the door, and they would laugh. They would moan and speak obscenely to excite him. I imagined the dimness of the room in the old house with its cracked walls and multiple layers of dried paint that cracked, leaving large pieces that crumbled on the floor, because it was rarely swept. I sometimes slept at Andrés's house, in his room, and I heard moans that made me laugh, but I don't remember exactly what I imagined. Those early days of adolescence are so imprecise, so full of doubt, that the imagination tends to exaggerate or underestimate. You don't know what is true or not, and most of the time you fall into the most tremendous naiveté or improbable fantasies.

That afternoon in the plaza, he told me that when his pajama pants fell down, he had semen on his thighs. His mother called him: "Come here, you poor thing, let me clean you up." He went. He approached the bed. His mother grabbed a corner of the sheet and cleaned him up. Andrés, respectful, shy, scared, watched her because it was okay if she did it. His

father, in bed, naked, his belly hairy, leaning on the pillow, was saying to him: *"Finish, finish* ," while he masturbated, *just like me* .
Andrés did it, and he thought it was okay. And they made him get into bed. They probably weren't raping him. They were just using him as a fetish. I'm not sure; around that time, Andrés was very slowly opening up to us. That afternoon in the plaza, he hugged me tightly and started crying on my shoulder. I thought: if they see us, they 'll yell "faggots" at us. But I hugged him back.
I felt that the two of us were the only inhabitants of a gloomy wasteland on the Buenos Aires plain.
Then I remembered my mother's forgotten words, spoken one afternoon, almost evening, at the village hair salon—vague, but their meaning was gaining ground in light of what Andrés had told me. His mother had invited my mother over; something had happened, a fight or something. I thought of the foreman's voluptuous figure, his strong hands so different from the delicate hands of her pianist husband. For once, she must have thought, she would let herself go. What a fantasy, I told myself, an orgy of two women and a strapping man.
I hugged Andrés so tightly in response to his crying that he must have thought I was more than his friend, I was his brother, his soulmate, and that I was already part of his body.
My mother's guilt and shame morphed before the son of those others, in the room of the old house, on the bed of springs and antique wood. Resentment, perhaps. Anger, surely. But both were so similar to love that I didn't care to distinguish between them. And that's how a strange creature was born between Andrés and me, in various forms, sometimes beautiful, other times astonishingly strange. A creature made of two immense hands and without a head.

2

Some time later, my father died. It was a funeral that was more disgusting than sad. The indifference of the neighborhood where we lived became apparent when, after several years of living there, everyone knew his story —trivial, quite ridiculous, really. A popular music composer with leftist leanings and a blacklisted man. Even that last detail seemed more like the boasting of someone who hadn't been able to create anything lasting. My mother's buildings, for example, would be more enduring than those songs. She, who treated me coldly at times, with resentment at others, was no longer young, but she remained attractive with her ash-gold hair, intelligent eyes, and a conversation that had the grace and talent to adapt equally to the lecture hall and the general store. That's why, feeling weary of the town, and free for the first time in a long time, we moved to Buenos Aires. The excuse: my architecture studies at the University. The real reason: the deanship of the Faculty of Engineering was vacant due to the death of the old man who had replaced her when my father and she went to Dolores.

The house was sold. We rented an apartment in Palermo. I used to get up early to go to university, but I insisted on going to the conservatory at night, the one on Avenida Córdoba near Pueyrredón. She, resistant to my decision, had to give in if she didn't want to lose sight of me. I would look at her, and incidentally, mention Andrés.

"Mom," he told her, "I'm going to see him this weekend."

And she knew I wasn't mentioning him because of our friendship, but because of his parents. What I had heard was her regret. Not for the act itself, but for the clumsiness of her tongue. A Freudian slip, we might call it, on that lost afternoon of my pre-adolescence, in my parents' bed, while she was telling me things about the neighborhood, and dreaming and remembering, her mouth slipped out. Desire, I would say.

During the following years, Andrés and I visited each other. He was twenty years old and couldn't escape his parents. He told me he no longer slept with them, only with his father, and even then, only sometimes. His mother had suffered a psychotic break and had been in the hospital for a year. His father didn't work and had gained weight. Andrés took care of him, bathing him, dressing him, and removing the wine bottles he usually hid under the bed. That's why he slept with his father; besides, it was the only room where one could be outside the damp snow of old paint, the pieces of

masonry from the ceiling that, falling, left dark openings where bats nested. I pictured that old house when he described it. One night, when I was visiting Dolores, I had to stay there.

"You have to stay in my old bedroom, Juanca," he told me.

"It doesn't matter," I replied.

The room was unfurnished, a lightbulb burned out on the ceiling, dampness dripping from the walls and the bathroom faucets. The same old bed, with sheets that hadn't been changed in who knows how long. I lay down on them, smelling Andrés, a scent I hadn't encountered in so long—I mean the scent of intimacy, of secretions, of course. I wasn't squeamish, because he was my friend.

In the middle of the night, I heard hoarse coughs and spitting that sounded like bombs being fired on the floor. I got up and went to my father's bedroom where Andrés was sleeping to check on him. I found them sitting on the bed: the old man naked and bent over a basin on the floor, Andrés patting his back.

"Do you want me to help you with anything?" I asked him.

-Don't worry, Juanca.

The lamp on the bedside table illuminated their faces, so alike now that my friend was an adult, that I had a kind of premonition, and I felt absurd and stupid. The future lies not in appearances but in actions, reason had taught me. And suddenly, from that deep pit that was that house, from the caverns carved into the old man's lungs, came one of his last cries of blood and vomit. I saw the old man's large body move like the hull of an ancient Viking ship: the long hair growing from the nape of his neck and the sides of his skull, the rest almost bald, his body hairy, his shoulders broad, his large-fingered hands covered in blood from trying to cover his mouth. Agitated, the old man accepted Andrés's embrace, who cared for him as one cares for a stray dog that is dying, that no longer bites or protests, that is simply tiresome and dirty and obstinate.

Then the old man turned over and lay down. Andrés cleaned the blood and vomit from his face and chest. I went to help him and tripped over the overflowing basin. I wanted to apologize, but it wasn't necessary. I sat on the bed and asked the old man if he remembered me. He looked at me, a faint smile barely visible through his dirty beard. He took my hand, brought it to his face, and kissed it, as if I were his son. I took the gesture as the

confusion of a dying man, and then I thought of my mother. Had she known that foreman before moving to Dolores? Wasn't it her, I thought I remembered (or perhaps imagined), who suggested the place to live when that whole business of the blacklist and the colonel's advice (which now seemed all too convenient) to my father came up?
The old man died of tuberculosis in the hospital where Andrés and I took him in the Dodge pickup the next morning. There was nothing more they could do, the doctors said: anemia, pleurisy, hemorrhaging. A week later, he was dead and buried in the Dolores cemetery.
-So what are you going to do now?
Andrés shrugged, under the autumn dew, looking at the leaves of the trees that fell like complaints on his shoulders.
-You're coming with me, you're staying at home until we figure out what you're going to do.
- I don't know how to do anything, Juanca.
He was strong, I knew that, but I wasn't going to send him to lift bags and make him a construction worker, as my mother would probably suggest. We had already spoken to her about Andrés and the neglect in which the old folks had raised him.
She locked the house. We went to Buenos Aires. She stayed in our apartment and slept in my room. My mother complained about the smell of unkempt, dirty men, but she went to the university with her large folders full of projects, sorting things out on the phone during breakfast, and always came back late, getting out of a car that was sometimes a taxi, other times a Falcon belonging to a stranger. The time I asked her, she said: a colleague. Andrés and I exchanged a glance across the kitchen table where we had dinner at eleven o'clock at night. She picked up a ladle and tasted the soup I had prepared.
-Not bad, Juanca. Are you ready for tomorrow's exam? Come here for a bit while I go to bed and we can review.
I had to give in if I wanted her to agree to my classes at the conservatory. Despite dedicating more time to music, I passed my university courses and graduated as an architect. Mom had plans for me, perhaps to get me a job at the architecture firm of some acquaintances.
Andrés passed away at the end of that year. He had gone out looking for work, and suddenly one day he told us he had found some agricultural

agents. He followed their trail by word of mouth until he reached the Rural Society. Andrés demonstrated his knowledge of agriculture, and they offered him a small amount of capital, as he put it, to make a profit. He then began selling agricultural products between Buenos Aires and the province. He traveled a lot, but his headquarters were in Dolores. He fixed up the old house and invited us one day to a meeting to see it. It was also to celebrate the opening of the shop, which operated on the same property, and I remembered, almost immediately, that it was the same date as his father's birthday.

Mom didn't want to come. She made up the excuse of work, but I already knew she was seeing someone, from college or wherever. The question was why she didn't introduce me to this middle-aged suitor. My mother wasn't that old, either; she was a demanding woman, and since becoming a widow, she'd become even more demanding. That's why it was so hard for me to bring friends or my current girlfriend home. She judged them with just one look, especially if they were from the conservatory, of course. I would have been remarkably lenient with a female student from the university, even if she were as ugly as a catfish. But what do I know? At that point, I didn't care. My world was music, and it's true that I had developed a structure for my compositions that was very spatial, atmospheric, influenced by contemporary assonant music. What I was composing at that time was heavily influenced by Varèse and Berio: bowed strings, percussion instruments, and electronic music filtered through acoustic sounds. But what fascinated me most was the sinister atmosphere of the low strings, interspersed with a certain soothing sweetness from the oboe at times, and other times from the violin, before startling and grabbing attention with restless tapping from the woodwinds. My teachers criticized my excessive use of *pizzicato* . They were right; I gradually abandoned it as I discovered how hackneyed it was, an old trick that sounded like a dying man coughing ever more weakly.
I rarely used the piano, my father's instrument. I considered it an abuse, a basic platform for beginners. But lately, I had begun to play the keyboard timidly. A high note, a low one, alternating, like a *scherzo.* An idea had emerged, but it was still a formless embryo, a possibility, nothing more, liable to be aborted.

I took Dolores to see my girlfriend at the time. Her name was Alina, and she was a violist. Small and slender, she would have been more in proportion to her body with a violin, but you don't usually choose those things. The viola's intermediate sound, she said, suited her temperament. I never saw her scream or throw a tantrum like a capricious artist when faced with a difficult piece of music; she adapted to the demands without false expectations. Methodical by nature, it hadn't taken her long to know what she wanted from her instrument, and from her life. In that, she was like my mother.

A friend of hers, a classmate from the National School of Buenos Aires who was studying Philosophy and Literature, also accompanied us. Sonia had an astonishing knowledge of literature, but especially of history. During the trip, the car filled with book titles and suddenly began to light up with chiaroscuro scenes, seascapes, still lifes, forests, and portraits of dead men and women. The history of art fascinated her. Did she paint? No, she said, with a sigh. But she could recreate the finest works of art with her conversation.

As I listened to her and glanced at her from time to time in the rearview mirror, I wondered if I was falling in love with her. Alina, watching us out of the corner of her eye, was perhaps wondering the same thing. Her indifference, however, was conciliatory.

That Saturday night in Dolores, so different for those city girls, became a scene of transgression that led them down paths previously unimaginable to them. They were literally captivated by us, and the influence of the old ranch house, the smell of the cobblestones overgrown with weeds, the scent of horse manure, and the wine, obviously, slowed their pretense of good manners and revealed their side…how can I put it without being pejorative…their wild side, their instinct. As for Alina, it was like seeing my mother when she told me about the way she used to behave in the bar scene with my father.

Relaxed, Alina opened her blouse, revealing a more than provocative neckline, and lifted her legs on the armchair that, after one in the morning, became a convenient piece of furniture used for eating, groping, and countless other things in the semi-darkness between walls that were tidy and painted, but always exuded that musty, musty scent that stirred lustful desires. And so, the prim and proper violist allowed herself to be made love

to on her beautiful, why not, slender, almost skinny body, with small, rosebud-shaped breasts, as they would say in a Corín Tellado novel that no one admitted to reading, but which lay at the bottom of the bedside table drawers of marriageable girls and married women bored with their husbands.

In the other armchair, the one outside, overlooking the fields, while the other guests milled about with their drinks in hand, hugging and kissing, or on the grass next to the shed with the machinery and hay bales, Andrés and Sonia were whispering and laughing. I heard words: art, countryside. Sonia was talking about Florencio Molina Campos, of course, an obligatory topic of conversation, at least at first, and one that Andrés found convenient to pretend he was interested in, but I had seen the way he had begun to watch Sonia, obsessively. And there they were, under the eaves, amidst the scent of alfalfa and lavender, kissing each other deeply.

Then I saw him go inside to get another bottle of whatever it was, his shirt open. That night, our friends, the ones who had known us since we were kids, had stayed over. Some of them fell asleep, but woke up when Alina started improvising something on the piano. Because Andrés, in his eagerness to be a progressive, had overspent, perhaps on superfluities. Like this piano, for example, which he bought for when I came to visit him. " *I bought it for you* , my friend," he told me on the phone a little while before, " *to listen to you* ."

Alina, half-drunk but in control of herself, played as well as she did with her viola, and other things, judging by how she'd been touching me just a little while ago. An improvisation on a Bach partita, which curiously sounded like a chacarera. I imagined, outside, the horses neighing and the ranch hands from the neighboring estates awakened by the music, which they didn't know where it was coming from, summoned by the hands of that city girl who inflamed her spirit and her limbs with that nocturnal musical hybrid. She was a woman, without a doubt, who was claiming her rights from the night.

I approached her from behind. I placed my glass on the piano, sat down, wrapping my legs around her and squeezing her breasts while kissing her neck. And she played, doing the same thing my mother must have done with my father while he played the piano in some dive bar or pub, back when they were young, before I was even born.

When the song ended, there was no applause, only glances and whispers. Behind them stood Andrés, shirtless, with the bottle in his hand, and Sonia was hugging him from behind, her hand inside his pants.
We went to bed, Andrés's parents' old bed, fixed up, of course, reinforced, with screws in the corners, the polished wood highlighting the ornamental trinkets on the headboard and legs. And the new mattress, and the sheets bought in Buenos Aires, but imported. The ceiling beams hidden in the night gave the illusion of a devastated field, where only we were.
It was the only time there were no fixed couples, and yet, feelings were forever determined, even intertwined. Alina's body was my obligation, but Sonia's was my privilege, and vice versa, it was Andrés's.
We observed each other's naked bodies, we looked at each other in the mirror that our parents had placed on the wall in front of the bed, and which continued there, ancient and perennial like an unconcerned god, like a substance of the earth born in the baked brick wall with which the house had been built.
By then I knew that Sonia's body attracted me, but it was forbidden from then on, because she, in love with Andrés, was leading me to him. And Alina's body, which was destined for me because she was the exact behavioral copy of my mother, was in love with me.
And who was Andrés in love with?
Perhaps, from no one.
And that's what always bound me to him. The idiosyncrasy of spiritual solitude, anguish transformed into detachment, disillusionment turned into indifference. The lost steps of a god astray in his limbo, no longer seeking a way out . No longer desperately drilling into the walls, nor banging his head against them, nor injuring his hands striking them.
In the labyrinth of that old house, we chased each other, and when we found each other, we escaped, and the vicious circle repeated itself again and again.
It was dizzying.
That's why I started composing, the next day, *Profonde esaltazioni* .

3

The composition of that work, with its advances and setbacks, more or less lengthy interruptions, and feverish periods of creation, took approximately ten years. When I believed it was finally finished, I transcribed the scribbled staves neatly. Although I already had assistants at the architecture firm who would have gladly and carefully done a good job of transcribing it, I didn't want to show it to anyone. Those who knew me at work were aware of my passion, even my talent, so to speak, for music. At first, when I entered that large apartment on Libertador Avenue, I was granted free rein thanks to my mother's connections with the architect and director of the firm. Many buildings were constructed by that firm, especially after the military dictatorship. Then, when they saw that my designs lacked the baroque flourishes or the austere lines hinted at in my music, which I had already been performing at private events or in small auditoriums, and that they posed no threat to my commercial reputation, and even attracted a certain kind of clientele they hadn't encountered before—artists, foreigners, and even a famous French magician—granted me, this time without hesitation, complete freedom of expression. I didn't use this freedom to dedicate time to architecture, but rather to my music. For many hours each day in the studio, on the drawing board, there were nothing but staves of the unfinished *Esaltazioni* . And many hours of the night, too, stolen from my wife, Alina. Both Andrés and I had begun living with our partners on that opening night in Dolores. Little by little, too, convention took hold. Alina traveled for her engagements with various orchestras or recording sessions. Our apartment in Palermo was just another stopover for her, where she could find legal sex or a peaceful rest. We understood each other, tolerated each other, comforted each other, aware that our absences were an oasis in the desert of our marriage.

Andrés and Sonia were in different situations, but with the same outcome, according to what he told me. She dedicated herself to her art history classes at the university and to her research for the books that, one after another, were published, but which sold very little. If it hadn't been for the success of Andrés's business, she wouldn't have been able to pursue the career she talked about and boasted about so much. Sonia was away from

Dolores almost every week because of her work in Buenos Aires, La Plata, and meetings at the museums where she was a curator.
Sometimes I would run into her at cultural events in embassies, museums, or simply at conferences and coffee shop chats. It wasn't planned, but then the frequency of our encounters became so pleasant that we started making plans to meet on different days of the week.
I used to meet with Andrés every other Saturday or Sunday in town, especially in the summer. We'd sit in the porch of the old house, watching the sunset, with a mate in our hands, and seeing the women he employed as servants or cooks on the ranch go by. They were always different, girls passing through or women in their thirties with good figures. He'd smile and touch their legs or buttocks when they brought in the biscuits or fried cakes, or he'd simply call them over to exchange a few useless words. I knew Andrés had many lovers, but they weren't even lovers; they were just women he used to relieve his lust, or perhaps he simply enjoyed watching them and having them standing there, licking his lips with desire at their fearful submission or their stubborn pride.
I envied that, what she'd learned from her parents, because all that exuberance of fleeting sex was nothing more than the relentless search for what had vanished forever. Her mother had probably died in the asylum; she never went to see her, nor did anyone ever ask her for anything. On those weekends, we sometimes slept with one of them, but I'd tire of the abundance and turn around, feeling Andrés's pleasure on the body of the girl he was with, who would then get up, and he'd touch my shoulder and say:
-Don't be so prudish, Juanca, you like it so much.
Those solitary walks in the same bed lasted as long as Sonia's trips. Since I knew her schedule with peculiar precision, Andrés used me as a spy and a cover. He would talk to Sonia on the phone from the bedroom and say:
-Juanca sends his regards.
Why bother, if I'd see her soon enough during the week, on San Martín or Florida streets? Did Andrés know that? I think so, hence the sarcasm.
Then he would hug me in bed after having played with the orifices of that mine that had emerged a little while before. He was my brother, of course, I was his soul brother. We hugged like only two men know how: without

shame, without skirmishes, without resentment. Passivity and activity canceled out like opposite poles.
The bodies of our parents, I suppose , were what we sought and found, and their transience was both a pleasure and a torment. When the night ended, the world would rule us.
Mom gave me a surprise that wasn't so surprising back then. She was overseeing the renovation of an apartment in the Kavanagh Building, one that belonged to a military officer, she said. She'd been working on it for months, visiting businesses in Buenos Aires and arranging purchases by phone abroad. Sometimes she'd laugh out loud, and I knew he was the owner of the apartment.
"Who was it?" I asked her, just to tease her.
He looked at me without suspicion, revealing little of what would be known later.
"Colonel Ansaldi, Juanca. You'll meet him soon," he replied then, hanging up the phone. "He's very interested in your work..."
-I don't design for the military, you know.
-I know, loyal to your father, dead, buried and forgotten… But I'm referring to your music, the colonel is a very cultured man, Juanca, he has many connections.
The point is, I was able to premiere the piece. I don't know who deserves the credit for that achievement. Probably my mother had pulled the strings that typed the notes on the colonel's keyboard. The opportunity would be at the Beethoven Conservatory, in a larger auditorium than I was used to, and the invitations included people from the government and other such eccentricities and refinements.
Could I refuse, despite being terrified? Alina jumped for joy when she heard the news, called her mother-in-law to thank her, and the next day they met at a confectionery shop on Alvear Street to finalize the details of the premiere. Alina canceled performances and began rehearsing with the group we knew from the conservatory. The chamber work for eight instruments lasted about forty minutes and was divided into two long sections that alternated between *allegros* and *andantes* in a kind of capricious concatenation of highs and lows, of profound depressions bordering on self-destruction and exalted peaks of madness and sex.

I was at the piano, Alina led the six strings: two violins, two violas, a cello, and a double bass, from whose depths the work was rescued by the languid, spectral oboe. The double bass stood tall, frenzied and weary, in a percussive manner, drifting away toward a showy, cheap jazz. But Alina would attack again with the strings in unison, sometimes asynchronous, almost always dissonant. And between the two extensive movements came the coda, a three-minute *scherzo* that flirted with madness, and the instrumentalists would become wildly excited, pushing the strings to their limits, as if they were about to break at any moment.

That night, the darkened auditorium, where the red glow of cigarettes and the reflection of epaulettes were visible, remained in ecstasy as the last note faded. My colleagues and I already knew that this kind of music was only for us, the musicians and those who understood the art. There were no catchy rhythms, no distinguishable melodies, it didn't even have the power to soothe; it was nothing more than an endless springboard, a carousel without end, a roller coaster that climbed to the heavens and descended into the subterranean depths of the unconscious.

But everyone applauded. The next day the reviews appeared, paid for, of course, by the colonel, who else? *A Schubertian experience* , some said; *an eccentric abyss of sadness,* others said *; the unknown Beethovenian work of a condemned man,* was, finally, the radio-friendly phrase of an overly respected critic.

The after-party was held at the Hotel Castelar, where the colonel had recently survived an assassination attempt. That night, of course, everyone talked about it; the smell of the gun and the spilled blood still lingered in the air. But the colonel was exuberant, showing off with my mother, the fashionable intellectual with long gray hair, slanted tortoiseshell glasses, and a knock-off dress that could easily pass for an Armani.

Unbearably fed up and nervous, I begged Andrés to get me out of there. I couldn't stand the greetings, the comments, or the questions about the play for another minute. Alina reluctantly agreed, though, because she was serenely enjoying the success. Sonia accompanied us without any fuss; it wasn't her scene, she said, too much noise and fake smiles. She preferred the portraits on the walls, which didn't hide anything. I didn't say goodbye to anyone, not even my mother.

We went to Andrés Funes's house that same night in Dolores. He drove four hours, or less, at high speed, in complete darkness, illuminating the road with the headlights of his Dodge—not the old truck, but a new one. We slept almost all day, each couple in their own bedroom. Alina was the first to get up and made breakfast, shooing the maid out of the kitchen. Andrés got up around noon on Sunday, in his long underwear, yawning and bumping into Alina.

That's how he told it to me. He was drunk, or hungover, but he spoke fluently. I could smell the whiskey on him, but I couldn't tell if he'd drunk it after getting up or during the night and morning. Sonia, from some point no one could pinpoint, was painting at her easel, wearing the same nightgown she'd slept in.

Alina didn't say anything to me. I got up around two in the afternoon, tired and nervous about the criticism I expected on Monday. I only noticed the coldness with which she treated Andrés, which, after all, was part of her temperament.

He said he would prepare dinner. But one of the farmhands came and started a fire for a barbecue. Night fell, and the four of us were outside by the fire, watching the sparks fly, listening to the whimpers of the dogs being kicked by the drunken farmhands. The women were laughing. Andrés and I sat on a split log, drinking and smoking. We watched them from afar, from the other side of the fire, illuminated and as if consumed by the flames of their own personal hell.

-They're cute, aren't they?

"I know," I replied .

-They're friends, aren't they? Like us.

-No, not like us.

-I know. They have nothing in common but distrust.

-You sleep with Sonia from time to time.

It wasn't a question.

-Do you mind?

He got up and walked towards where they were sitting. From afar, through the flames of the fire that melted the fat dripping onto the ground and turned the meat of the split and staked cow, I saw them looking at him, questioning.

And suddenly, a shout, quickly censored by the same voice that had uttered it. I went to see what was happening; they were arguing. Alina ran inside the house. Sonia was confronting Andrés.
"What's wrong?" I asked.
The laborers laughed.
He told me then that it was the second time that good old Andrés had groped my wife. The first time was in the kitchen when she got up; he'd leaned against her backside in his underwear. And now, in front of everyone, he'd grabbed her. If it hadn't been for Sonia stopping him, he would have raped her right there.
"It's not that big of a deal," said Andrés, laughing at the exaggeration.
"And you, Juanca, aren't you doing anything?" Sonia said to me, with her hands on her waist, excited like a girl from a low-class neighborhood.
I looked at my friend, my brother. I felt like the whole world was closing in on me, but it was the laughter of the laborers that drove me crazy.
I punched Andrés in the face, and he fell to the floor, too drunk to defend himself. Sonia went into the house. The two of us were left alone, me lifting Andrés's head and resting it on my legs, squatting in the mud, cleaning his face.
That night I would have stayed with him forever if only he would forgive me.
And he, knowing beforehand, since he was a boy who spied on his parents' room, that feelings have no sense or reason, told me:
"I'm impotent, you know? I can't love anyone. Not even you, do you realize that? Not even you."
He kissed me right on my beard, very close to my lips.
The poor fellow was crying because of his wickedness.

4

A few years passed, five, six, I don't know. Mom died one day, while supervising the progress of a building that was never finished because the dividing wall of the old house next door collapsed on her and many bricklayers.
My wife agreed to be his replacement in my life; she was destined to be, but I wasn't the same man I'd been fifteen years before. I was an outcast who couldn't have what I wanted, without really knowing what it was. My dreams were related to Dolores, and like an asynchronous onomatopoeia, that name became his defining characteristic, and I began to transform into a hypochondriac. One day my stomach would torture me with a vicious heartburn that irritated me incessantly until the end of the night; another day a sprained ankle would leave me limping for weeks. Sometimes an itch would keep me awake all night, and the next day a migraine would replace it, making my life a living hell.
Alina and I argued every time she was home, and it was during the time she was hired by the Buenos Aires Philharmonic, so she didn't have the opportunity to travel. She ended up leaving me because one day I tried to hit her. Her voice, for God's sake, was the same as my mother's, full of reproaches and demands, spoken with the merciless tone of good manners.
Sonia had left Andrés after opening night. We met many times after that. She cried, saying she loved him, but there were too many unspoken things, too many secrets, too many hidden resentments that suffocated us both. Then, in the bar where we met, she would take my hand and tremble beside the cup of cold coffee, and I would tremble too, because we were both thinking about the absent one whose presence was more tangible than anything around us.
Sonia's obsession with Andrés, that love that couldn't quite die, bound us together more than any other kind of love. So she stayed with me. My sorrows became music for the portraits she sketched. The nudes in her paintings were anguished men, suicidal men, or men gazing at the sea as if it were the end of the world. With Sonia, we laughed, talked, and made love as if we were addressing someone else, each of us an object, an excuse, a mere comparison so we wouldn't have to admit we were mad. Some people have a dog or a cat, for example; others have, for the same purpose, a husband or a wife.

It was, as I said, a few years later that Andrés called me. He was working in the office of the company that had bought his business some time after Sonia left. Dolores's business collapsed and went bankrupt. The company that bought the house, the land, and all the rusting , abandoned machinery took pity on him and hired him. He barely scraped by that way, living in a boarding house in Once.
He called me early, asking me to have breakfast before he started work. We hadn't spoken in years, not since that punch I threw at him. We talked over coffee, our conversations punctuated by the shame of the silence we'd built between us all those years. He was gaunt, thin, but his hands and arms held a deep longing. Suddenly, like a revelation, like every unexpected discovery, I found the right word, I think, for the anguish I saw in his eyes that afternoon when we were teenagers and we hugged.
The longing. What a precise word, I say to myself, as I see him looking at the woman at the other table, who was giving us a knowing look.
Holding him close, I asked him about his life. He wanted to go back to Sonia. The poor guy knew nothing. He wanted to go back to her because she was his serenity, his peace, his balance. An old remedy he hadn't used in a long time, and whose absence exacerbated the symptoms of his illness.
"Andrés…" I said to him, in a low voice, like a flirtatious remark.
But he got up to talk to that damn early riser.
He left me alone at the table, speechless, my longing unfulfilled.
I paid and left, observing, through the shop window as I walked away along the sidewalk, the useless labors of love that unknowingly feed the dogs of anger.

5

Paola and Francisco, like the old lovers with reversed lenses, also met a bad end. They were both professional thieves. She was a prostitute, or at least pretended to be one to lure men to a motel. Once the intended victim

was naked, her partner would enter, put up a fight, tie him up, and the criminal pair would vanish with the wallet, the watch, and the ring—the sacred trinity that had to be respected without question. If they left him his shoes, even valuable ones, the scapegoat would be very lucky. Sometimes, they'd also find gold cufflinks, a chain with a cross, and very occasionally, a briefcase with valuables that the poor guy had been forced to carry home from work hoping for a quickie before returning to his wife and children.

At first, it was just a fantasy. An idea I indulged in as I walked away that morning from the bar where Andrés, after begging me, with his roundabout way of speaking, with his unspoken words, to help him win Sonia back, had ignored me as if I had never been his closest friend, his soul brother. Forgetting me completely, perhaps already drunk at that hour of the morning, as I too was wont to do, because I didn't have a wife either, and we were both alone, just like in the beginning, like that afternoon in Dolores when he told me everything about his parents and him, and we embraced surrounded by the nascent cold breeze that gradually sharpened until it acquired the edges of a dangerously sharp knife.

By the end of the day, the idea had become an obsession. But I was an architect, and I didn't associate with thieves or criminals. In fact, I was afraid of them. But who knows, many of them could have been those friends I chatted with at work, had coffee with on the sidewalk outside a café, or who shook my hand as new clients of the studio. At the conservatory, it was different. The musicians didn't hide their true nature, and anyone who wore a mask for a face would betray themselves when playing a piece of music, in the strumming of a guitar, the touch of a violin, or the more or less forceful breath they made on the flute, for example.

However, Colonel Ansaldi kept following me. He became my protector after my mother's death. He invited me to charity dinners, to art exhibitions, and then, when I had almost convinced myself of his charitable and fearful soul, he invited me to the Military Circle for the evaluation of a project for a new seaside resort on the Buenos Aires coast, a practically complete city, with almost futuristic projections and aimed, obviously, at tourists, above all, and foreign investment, in particular.

When the invitation to the studio arrived, the expected commotion ensued. People congratulated me, patted me on the back, and invited me privately to their homes to give me assignments to pass on to that almost stepfather

figure, the colonel. The studio owner took me to his office, surrounded by glass walls that offered an unbeatable, lush, enviable view of the port. The Río de la Plata looked like the sea, and we, from our vantage point, indulged in the ethereal illusion of being kings of the world. And for a moment, I, too, was convinced.

"I knew the day would come, dear Juan Carlos," Walter Márquez, the star architect of the faculty, the most awarded and admired professional in South America, would tell me. He was handsome, young, and well-mannered. There was even an air of mystery about him, almost as if he were guilty. He had a wife, but no children.

Dinner at the Circle was different for me, even though Mama had told me something. She was, in any case, very reserved when it came to the colonel. What was he after? It wasn't a duty to his dead lover, nor even a promise. He wasn't that kind of man. Something my mother had, or knew, and that I had inherited without realizing it.

The craving.

Absurd, I told myself.

I had no money, I didn't even own the apartment in Kavanaugh where my mother moved. My capital was solely my talent for design and music.

My only significant piece, the *Esaltazioni,* had been recorded by Grammaphone and performed by a European octet. That caused quite a stir in Buenos Aires: newspaper reviews and specialized critiques. Nothing massive, of course, but it had generated considerable buzz in musical circles. The Wagnerian Association offered me a concert date to perform that work and a premiere. Alina reappeared, elated, because, after being passed over for the European recording, I had a new opportunity. She urged me to forget my resentment and start rehearsing. There were eight months to go, I told her. I had prior commitments.

"Which ones?" he asked me.

I hesitated for a moment.

-A project for the government.

He coughed, smiled, and grabbed my arm, as if I were still his partner.

-I'll go with you.

Then he had another malicious idea, but one that filled my soul with joy. On the day of the dinner, would I pick her up? She lived in San Isidro, I lived in Palermo. Better yet, we could meet on Libertador.

That night, she got out of the taxi, thin but with wider hips than years before, like her viola, perhaps. We passed each other, but I was with Sonia. They looked at each other, Sonia with a poker face, Alina's face swarming with the green flies of hatred and envy. I laughed to myself, and Sonia and I went into the hall full of armed men and their wives.
Dinner was uneventful, elegant, and pleasant, without any excesses. The toasts followed one another without incident or mishaps. The uniforms were immaculate. Afterward, in the café, the men gathered to smoke, drink, and converse in the spacious armchairs surrounded by battle paintings and military portraits.
The colonel approached me from behind the armchair where I was sitting with a cigar that was making me feel very ill. With his hands on my shoulders and his mouth close to my left ear, he said:
-My dear, you remind me so much of your mother…
Already seated in the opposite armchair and with a glass that the waiter had brought him, I replied:
-They say I look like my old man.
-Undoubtedly, Juan Carlos, but I'm referring to his gestures, his distinction, characteristics typical of his mother.
"But did you know my father? Do you know if he lacked distinction?"
He leaned back in his chair and took a sip of his whiskey, maybe bourbon.
"I didn't mean to offend his memory, my friend. Everyone, in their own way, is a cog in the machine of our country. I respect all ideologies, except when they cause harm, of course."
-Colonel, my father's only ideology was the piano.
Serious.
"I see I've provoked you unintentionally, dear. Your mother had already warned me about your temper, and I like that very much."
-Is that why he chose me for the project?
-Partly, my friend. We'll do something great…
-But I haven't accepted yet…
"Well, I understand that you and your partners need to think about it, but from what I've heard from Márquez, I don't think he'll hesitate much to accept, and then..."
"I'm an independent partner, Colonel, I'm under no obligation to accept..."

-But friend, can you afford to distance yourself from that prestigious association?
-Like my old man, a colonel, I have another profession, less lucrative, of course.
Ansaldi stood up, smiling. He took the cigar from my fingers.
"It's bad for him, Juanca, he's not used to it. Come on."
He helped me up. I felt nauseous and my head was spinning. My eyes were watering and my hands were sweaty. We walked through the room, the men joking, surrounded by smoke and disjointed burps. We reached the hallway that led to the men's restroom. Some urinals were occupied, but the last one was a refuge for my nausea.
I vomited up my dinner and turned pale. Ansaldi held my chest from behind so I wouldn't stain my suit. I leaned against the tiles and continued to throw up what little was left in my stomach. Then he grabbed toilet paper and dried my mouth.
For an instant, for a blatant second, he acted like my father, and that was my downfall.
We stood alone in front of the mirror. The men who knew him respected him too much to urinate in his presence. He washed my face and dried me with his own handkerchief.
-You're still a kid, Juanca, if you'll allow me to call you that and address you informally, as your mother would have liked.
-Why do you want to buy me, Colonel?
I faced him, with the mirror between us. He had his large hands on my shoulders, his uniform disheveled, and I had my tie loose.
-Your mother promised her that she would protect you…
-What about, Colonel?
-From the Funes inheritance, my dear.
-What the hell are you talking about, they're all broke?
"It's in the blood , son. Who do you think put up the money for Funes to start the farming business? If it went under, it was because he was a drunk and an idiot, but he's still your relative. We have to erase the Funes blood, boy, my dear son, if you're like my son..."
The colonel's voice seemed to break with emotion, like a skillfully staged scene. He stroked my head, ruffling my hair like a boy's, and kissed me on the cheek.

"You see, what we have to do is give you back your old man's last name, the left-handed one, I mean, the one you love so much. Andrés Funes is a troublesome file that can't be easily made to disappear, even though he seems like a nobody. The justice system, the courts, you know, and some judges who are such a pain in the ass."
The memory of my old, disheveled woman that afternoon at the hairdresser's, so many years before, was clearly reflected in the mirror. And the memory of my ears, which Nicola Voltoretá hadn't passed on to me as I thought, but which he had taught me nonetheless.
I insisted; I wanted to hear it from him.
"Things, my dear, business abroad," Ansaldi replied.
-Guns? Drugs? Boys? Women?
The old ranch, Andrés's business, the adjacent land. All of it was a branch of the wells, a stopover for clandestine trucks. The old, forgotten pampa, like an abandoned house where miseries are hidden. Andrés endangered all of it with his drunkenness, with his increasingly erratic madness, with his coming and going in search of women who had ears, who knew where they came from or who they were.
The colonel put a finger to my lips as a sign of silence.
Looking in the mirror, he said, as if addressing someone behind him.
Mirrors listen…
-Come on…
-You see what you want to see, kid, but you hear the truth, you should know that better than anyone.
And he began to hum the melody hidden in the *Esaltazioni* , which I never thought I had composed. But there it was, clear and crisp like a propaganda jingle in the middle of a requiem.

Andrés Funes, acting as a front man, wasn't the friend I had imagined, the one with whom I shared my deepest secrets. He was someone else entirely, hiding things as he had hidden so many during his childhood. I couldn't blame him, though. Shame is something too deeply rooted in the soul, and it's fed daily by guilt. The gaze of others is merely the tool that undermines and penetrates fertile ground for cultivating failure.
But I couldn't forgive; my mother had taught me that. Nicola, my old man, had left too soon, abandoning me to her influence—mere guilt, mere

demands, mere anguish—from which my eyes barely peeked out onto the surface of the world. He had left behind unwavering idealism, the anarchy of feelings, the violence of beauty amidst domestic filth, and the eternal, invisible ecstasies of music. Seconds like hours, hours like eternities. The immortal life of art against the transience of engineering, which crumbles before the imperious power of hydrogen.

My parents' union was a union of the sexes, and good upbringing took care of its governance. It wasn't a brotherhood of souls, as I thought Andrés and I had. And now I knew that wasn't the case either. That none of that existed.

And now, the unsatisfied desire sought to rid itself of the lustful remnants, and found in the public opportunity, the private opportunity.

We met the colonel in the Castelar sauna. He'd almost taken me under his wing. I moved around him, dodging his personal guards, who ignored me as soon as they saw me. Through the steam, I noticed the surgical scar from the much-discussed attack in that very spot. Facing each other, sweating, towels in hand, I observed the beads of perspiration on his thick mustache. His eyes were fixed on me, not smiling, but questioning.

-Did you think of anything? Throw him in jail, that's enough.

"What I've been wondering, Colonel, is why you don't fabricate a case against him yourself, or send your henchmen after him, so to speak. Andrés is just a poor fellow..."

"Those poor guys are the most dangerous, kid. They're like the layers of an onion; the more you peel them, the more they make you cry."

Then I told him my fantasy, the one about the pairs of thieves I had read about in the press.

He looked at me with satisfaction.

-Good idea, son. So simple, man, I never would have thought of it. You're clearly an artist...

He stood up, hugged me, and left the steam room. The strong man, the stepfather. The mentor of my orgy.

The henchmen, who, as such, had no names and didn't call themselves that, put me in contact with the scum. Not a poor neighborhood or a shantytown. An apartment in Recoleta on the corner of Talcahuano and Sánchez de Bustamante. A woman with platinum hair and black eyes, wearing a

designer dress but with chapped lips, chewing gum. Her voice was high-pitched, her manner indecent. I never met her partner.
She greeted me by peering through the peephole, beyond the flimsy barrier of the intercom. After the formal introduction, which served as a sort of password, we talked and agreed on my needs. The cost, of course, was covered by my godfather.
"Just a scare," I told him before leaving. "To frighten him, you understand?"
She smiled, blowing the scent of Bazzoka all over my face.
"Stay calm," he told me.
I wanted to know the method, the step-by-step process, like in a musical composition or the construction of a house. I imagined the cheap motel she would take him to, run-down, like the one Andrés was used to, from the outside like a prison with tall, barred windows, and the only entrance a gate on the side.
I knew the night it was going to happen. It was, by some astrological coincidence of personal catastrophes, the very day of the premiere of the *Esaltazioni* at the Wagneriana. I gave up playing. I sat in the front row, with all eyes on me before and after the concert, watching Alina conduct the chamber ensemble on stage. When the last note ended, she stood up, leaving her viola and bow resting on the chair, and after the applause, she invited me to join her.
The colonel and a whole army of men, hidden in civilian clothes among the crowd, were supporting me. Standing up there, with my ex-wife's hand—she was trying to leave the "ex" behind—he already knew he would be the executor of my future work. Sonia, proud Sonia, had stayed in her apartment, perhaps painting, perhaps choosing the paintings for a new exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts. I asked her not to come with me; she accepted as if she had been expecting such a request.
Did she know what would happen that night? Did she even suspect it? Since then, I think she did, but she couldn't stop it. Women like her love and witness the inevitable destruction of their loves.
In every face in the audience, Andrés's childhood face was blurred. In the almost beardless cadets, invited to the concert for being handsome and effeminate, I saw the adolescent face that had wept in the plaza. And in the rugged, bearded, or neatly shaven faces of the officers, I saw Andrés in the dormitory bed, frightened, defeated. Perhaps, desperate.

I had no choice but to wait: the greetings and congratulations, the handshakes and the promises of dinners and events. The spa project had been announced, of course. We went to dinner, and Alina, reborn, ecstatic, cuddled me and caressed my thigh while we ate. It excited me, of course. I am a man, after all, even though I thought about that other man in the hostel hotel, who knows in what state of helplessness. How had they treated him? What had they done to him?

At three in the morning, the colonel approached me and whispered in my ear. He had to go, he said; he couldn't betray his men to the police. Something had happened at the hotel, something unexpected.

I took a taxi. The taxi driver looked at the sign, winked at me, and said: "It's not very clean, sir. I know a better one; if you'd like, I can take you there."

I overpaid him, stepped off the broken tiles onto the sidewalk, and rang the bell. The clerk, half asleep, listened to my explanation. He was either pretending not to hear or he was just plain stupid, but he'd already been warned. I told him to call the police when I told him to, not before. He nodded, mistaking me for a cop.

I walked down the dark hallway. Open doors and unmade beds, others closed like a morgue, from which wafted the smell of stale beer and old urine. At the end, the room with its door open and missing handle. The bed next to the sealed window, the floor made of plastic sheeting and covered in old patches. The light was off, but I saw Andrés's body on the wrinkled sheets. Naked and lying on his back, he seemed to be asleep.

I bent down to wake him, but tripped over something on the floor. I turned on the bedside lamp, which miraculously worked, but it was weak and dim. The woman's body lay there, in her underwear, her head smashed.

I sat on the bed and grabbed Andrés's hands, which were covered in blood. I imagined, as if I had been there while they performed my music on stage, the choreography of the events in that hostel room, the assembly of doom, the greatest and most talented engineer.

The entrance to the hotel, the passage through the hallway, amidst kisses and laughter. The bed, the clothes strewn about, and then the onslaught from his partner when Andrés was already carried away, distracted, clouded by the alcohol of that woman who had kissed and groped him,

leaving him naked and defenseless like an old man, with no weapons but his hands, which in the end were of little use.
They would have tied him up, surely, laughed at him, even played with that incongruous and discordant behavior that was not often found in the ordinary types who were usually their victims. They would wonder why the man cried like a child, or begged for forgiveness between sobs, or pleaded for mercy as if that pair of prisoners were his parents.
At some point, their laughter lowered their defenses, and the guy probably left the gun somewhere. Maybe, they thought, they could mess with him a little more; who would even notice, the guy was crazy, a nutcase.
They didn't see it coming. He jumped on her, hit her with the gun, maybe. The guy, who knows, one of those who just rob, one of those who do that when the others are tied up or on the ground, and kick and run away, got scared: his partner was dead, the other guy was like a madman with the revolver in his hand, and the police were showing up any minute.
There was no going back, and no way to fix it.
"I didn't want this," I told him, when he opened his eyes and tried to tell me what he already knew. He didn't even listen, crying between coughs, squeezing my hands, begging like a helpless drunk.
They would imprison him for life, until he died of his own accord in a solitary cell, lost in his chosen solitude. He was not a man who merely survived in prison; unlike any other, his soul was a chamber song, a profound exaltation of intimate agonies and thwarted ecstasies.
Loneliness was his only friend, helplessness his only ability.

So I grabbed the abandoned gun lying on the floor, covered with the sheets. I pointed it at Andrés and fired.
The fingerprints of the prisoner who had escaped from the crime scene on the weapon would build a closed case.
But before asking the manager to call the police, he needed time to construct other fallacies of the imagination to compensate for the world's catastrophes.
Sitting on the bed, I rested Andrés's head on my legs, stroking his hair like a boy, and waited until the first sunlight filtered through the slats of the forever closed blind.

THE MAN AT THE STATION

1

Just tell me, Lisandro. I was in love with Mecha too, as were Arturo, her cousin, and Franco, the ranch hand. But where to begin, I wonder, when everything is mixed up: them, the land, and my feelings.

The Sanhueza ranch was the largest in General Lavalle. They were respected for their austere and humble past, like that of any Spanish settler, a Basque to be precise, like the great-grandfather who had settled on that plain filled with trees that barely reminded him, perhaps, of the willow groves of his homeland. It all began with a plot of land without a name or recognized ownership, on the banks of a stream that, with the passing decades and the turn of the century, eventually dried up, leaving behind a small wooden bridge that still stands. The successive crops that ended in just as many failures were inherited by the only son whom the man and his wife brought with them as a newborn. Spanish by birth but a criollo by upbringing, Humberto Sanhueza traded the plow for harnesses and began raising horses. He knew a thing or two about it, because he had grown up in the countryside with the day laborers his father hired and didn't always pay, because when harvest time came, there was nothing left but stubble left by drought, downpours, or mismanagement. He had also learned from the cattle rustlers at the end of the century, when he was still a teenager, or even younger, seeing how horses were treated better than men, not to mention the women of the countryside, who seemed like beasts of burden and procreation carrying bundles on their backs and children against their chests.

All of that lasted a little over a quarter of a century. By the beginning of 1920, the eldest son had seen his father die at the hands of the cattle rustlers who had been harassing him for many years, perhaps envious of the prosperity and the fine stock he had managed to raise on the banks of the Ajó River, a strange mix of smoke and sea air, so near and yet so far, that brought the dryness of the sand, like invisible dunes bathed in sunlight. The horses were raised healthy and strong, but the economic prosperity was as precarious as the need for care was intense. Thefts were incessant, and soon more was being spent on protection by bribing the successive police commissioners and then the councilmen, whose hands were always different and so numerous that they were always empty.

Mecha's future father was named Enzo Sanhueza, and he and his only younger brother remained alone on the main ranch, which already covered several leagues, occupying what was then part of the city. The city expanded eastward to distinguish itself from the properties of this family that had survived the raids at the end of the century and the thefts of cattle rustlers. But politics was encroaching on social life, even in those parts, and the landowners, however moderate they might be, were not entirely well-regarded.

With his ranch mortgaged to the Provincial Bank, a brother studying to be a doctor, the slicked-back-haired Macario Sanhueza who dressed in his finest clothes to ride the fine bay horses he had inherited, and with no more than twenty horses he had managed to save from the onslaught thanks to a new change in government, Enzo, Mecha's future father, changed course. If the English are so prolifically efficient, if their involvement in national assets—land, railroads, businesses, governments—has generated so much insidious activity, why not imitate them? he wondered.

The apathy of the Spanish blood, so outraged, was something that seemingly could not be eradicated, but at least he would try to educate it in the English way. And that was how the sheep farming began. He, who knew nothing about sheep, sold the horses to the English, because that's what they called everyone, even if they were Scottish, Welsh, or Irish, all of them enterprising and equally interested in the wealth of what they called the Argentine pampas. Some more than others, they worked the land with their sense of opportunity sharply alert, like little alarm bells. What he managed to earn, which wasn't much, nevertheless gave him a certain renown, adding to that already enjoyed by his family.

The story goes—one I heard repeatedly in the city, and even Mecha and the boys told me in various versions—that the then-presidential candidate Alvear had come with his wife, an opera singer, both surrounded by the cream of Buenos Aires society, to visit the town during his campaign. Rarely had such a display of good taste been seen amidst the respectful crowd of farmhands and country women. It so happened that on that particular Sunday of the campaign, the last two Sanhueza horses were on display for sale. Enzo waited, sitting in a rocking chair, riding a whip, striking the ground with weeds, gazing at the sunny afternoon where the

nearby grove concealed dogs mating near couples doing the same, perhaps finding the only opportunity they could.
The president, who, though not yet president, looked nothing more than a well-dressed Buenos Aires resident for the occasion: high boots, gabardine trousers, linen shirt and silk handkerchief, took off his hat in front of Sanhueza's outstretched and open legs.
-How are you doing, my friend?
Enzo looked at him, shielding his eyes from the sun.
"Good day, boss," he replied. "How can I help you?"
Don Torcuato appeared, pointed to the bay horses, and inquired about their price.
"Which one, friend?" Enzo blurted out, getting up to wipe his hands on his pants and offering a greeting to the man from Buenos Aires.
-Both of them, buddy.
"Damn," Enzo said, surprised, unaware that there were high-society ladies nearby. He was still feeling the effects of his siesta and the wine from the barbecue. "Excuse me, sir... ladies... my manners."
Don Torcuato laughed and patted him on the shoulder to dismiss any lingering traces of learned manners. They walked together then toward the corral. Watching, circling the animals, and receiving advice from the men the politician had brought with him, he was interrupted by his wife, the famous soprano. She was tall, slender, almost a vestal virgin from a Wagnerian opera. She wanted to ride, and there was no way to dissuade her.
Enzo was suspicious, of course, but not of the people accompanying the future president. After fruitless attempts to convince her otherwise, they prepared the saddle while she changed her dress inside a general store with a friend, perhaps a lady's companion. They returned laughing together, and Enzo offered her his hand to help her mount. While they waited, the men had spoken amongst themselves, suspicious, but Don Torcuato seemed pleased. And Enzo, more than that, was euphoric. The money the man had offered him was almost equal to what he had received for the entire lot he had sold, or rather, practically given away. The only thing missing was for everything to be ruined by a capricious woman who might fall, hurt herself, or even kill herself. Enzo was a confirmed bachelor

then, and would be for a long time; women disgusted him, he said, with their narrow-mindedness and their flitting ways.
But Mrs. de Alvear behaved like an expert horsewoman, or rather like an ordinary rider, accustomed to controlling her horse according to its character and temperament. After circling it several times, she returned to the dirt road and gave her consent to the purchase.
Enzo said goodbye to what remained of his inheritance that very afternoon. He hid the check in his underwear, and the next day he went to the bank to pay off the mortgage on the ranch. He had little left to undertake his project, but they extended him a new one when they learned about that Sunday afternoon. The bank employees greeted him respectfully, and from then on, when Alvear would soon rise to power, the Sanhuezas—Enzo with his sheep and shearing, the ranch increasingly befitting his stature, Macario with his distinction as a medical student, who switched to veterinary medicine when his brother gave him the ultimatum: either continue with his whims and abandon the ranch, or put on his riding breeches and get his hands dirty. It seems the air of the countryside was in the Sanhuezas' blood , because the attractions and luxuries of Buenos Aires didn't last long for Macario; after all, he was a boy who liked women above all else, and he could get them anywhere.
The Sanhueza brothers, seven years apart in age, upheld their family's good reputation. Real men, some said, progressive yet conservative, they only set foot in a church to accompany a casual girlfriend (in the younger brother's case) or for funerals (in the older brother's). They did the shearing, treated sheep scabs, and helped with lambing. Macario had changed, becoming both lazy and refined, growing his hair and beard long. The ranch hands and landowners alike called on him for any ailment of their animals—dogs, cats, rabbits, cows, or pigs. He'd even helped the ninety-year-old woman's canary survive for a few days, so she wouldn't miss it so much.
The women idolized him, and many wondered, like his brother, if he had fathered children out of wedlock. But that's what he'd studied for, he told Enzo one night as they returned from the fields, each with a bottle of wine in one hand and the other on the reins of their respective horses.
-What you, Enzo, I don't know how you manage.
The other, in the darkness, let out a laugh tinged with sarcasm.

Macario married first. There was no love, it was obvious at the wedding, nor was there any beauty, because the little Chinese girl, as Macario called his wife, was dark-skinned but good-looking. He had gotten her pregnant, but he hadn't won her over like he had the others. "No remedies," she told him, her hands on her hips, the color of her dark eyes standing out against the white teeth that had smiled at him so many times. That year Arturo was born; I'm referring to the 1930s, when the military arrived with their democratic trappings and their de facto methods.

Inspectors were sent to the ranch to verify compliance with the health regulations, all created with the country's development in mind. However, the unrest overshadowed the import maneuvers at customs, which were so riddled with new taxes that it was unclear who or what they applied to. With propaganda touting the progress of national industry, the country was proclaimed the breadbasket of the world, and cattle were exported for millions of pesos. Sheep depended on the textile industry for sales. A few factories emerged during this period, and certain fabrics garnered attention abroad. However, the business wasn't as lucrative as selling directly abroad, but garments made with these wools returned to the country and fetched several times more than if they had been manufactured domestically. The government turned a blind eye, and the businessmen grew rich.

Enzo just wanted to sell, and he didn't care who he was selling to. As long as they paid, that was enough, and so he wasn't surprised the day he went to open a new account at the Provincial Bank. The manager called him into his office; the new branch was under the supervision of a board appointed by the government.

"Don Enzo," the director said to the now well-known bachelor nearing forty, "I have some advice for you, my friend. As a valued customer of ours for many years, I have a moral obligation to advise you to adapt to the changes that are coming."

Enzo looked around sarcastically, even glancing out the window to see if he could spot any signs of an impending storm, or the arrival of a regiment.

"In our town, my friend, a branch of the Bank of London will soon open. I'm telling you this in confidence, because it hasn't been officially announced yet, but I feel it's my duty to share with the people I trust the advantages it will bring us."

Enzo pictured the wheelbarrows of banknotes and gold bars rolling through the bank doors, like something out of a Charlie Chaplin silent film. There was no going back; he had wanted it, and he had gotten it.
They opened an account for him at the Bank of London, which never had a branch in the city; it was a joint account with the provincial bank. All the money coming in and going out was sent to the ranch in bank statements once a month. And that's how he met his future wife; she was the secretary of the representative who met with him in his austere study, typical of a well-to-do rancher. Don Mac Alister arrived punctually on Saturday afternoons, accompanied by his secretary, Miss Martina Larriere, who transcribed every conversation until the meeting ended with a pleasant afternoon tea, a blend of local and English cuisine. She translated perfectly what her boss said so that Mr. Sanhueza wouldn't miss a single detail of the transactions, which he didn't always manage to do, judging by the increasingly frequent, disoriented or distracted expression on the virile Mr. Enzo's face. A man with a rugged face but harmonious features, a short but unkempt beard, thinning, wavy brown hair, and eyes as blue as the ocean that was so close and that she knew from her summers in Mar del Plata. Mr. Mac Alister indulged them with coffee and milk, gazing in wonder at the two Argentinians smiling at each other as they shared mate, which was passed from hand to hand, the kettle being refilled with hot water, until night fell on the pampas and he insisted to his secretary that they return to Buenos Aires. The driver arrived to pick them up at eight o'clock at night, but one day she would not accompany him.
"Mr. Sanhueza invited me to spend Sunday at the ranch, mister," she said, next to the gate where the car was waiting with one of the back seat doors open.
The English banker must have thought he'd lost another secretary, a good one, to the infamous gauchos of Argentina, but what could he do? After all, it was just another link Her Majesty was establishing with those distant lands. He was perhaps accustomed to marriage forming unbreakable commercial ties, and he was right. Soon, the Sanhuezas' neighbors and acquaintances saw Miss Larriere as the only woman who had conquered Enzo's heart and body, so hard to get for the fairer sex.
Two years after the birth of her nephew Arturo, Martina gave birth to Mercedes. And from then on, the two cousins seemed destined never to be

apart, like a marriage arranged before their conception, where family factors complemented financial ones, as in the best aristocracies.

I only saw Mecha three times in my life. The first time was when we were teenagers and I had to run an errand for the ranch, at my mother's insistence; she was the owner of my family's businesses in these parts at the time. I'm a Goncalvez, you may have heard us called, undertakers by trade, according to some, garbage collectors and refuse collectors, of everything nobody wants. Shearing leaves a lot of dirt that clogs up the sheds where the work is done, or just the ground if it's out in the fields. Sanhueza had hired us a long time ago, and I was learning the trade.
I went to the ranch in my old cart, alone, looking like a rebellious teenager defying my family's wishes, my dark hair, my sour complexion, my moldy green eyes, my nascent beard that I still thought was sparse and patchy, like black spots on my face that resembled cesspools. How could anyone love me looking like that? And when I saw Mecha that afternoon when I delivered the papers to her father, sitting in the rocking chair and drinking mate with her cousin, I fell in love, literally and instantly. It couldn't be any other way; anyone who saw her would feel the same. Her beauty was unhealthy for any heart that was still virgin, and I guessed that was true even for those hardened men, weathered by farm work. Both the silent Arturo with his budding poet's soul, and the austere Franco with his cursed inherited flesh.
I shook hands with both of them, because even then they were a trio who went everywhere together: in the countryside, towns, and cities, they were seen walking or riding with remarkable harmony. Although it was known that the cousins would marry someday, such a close blood tie wasn't well-regarded, even though customs permitted it. Franco, then, was a prodigious figure for them, and the image they projected provided the perfect balance, like a triangle that could never be undone unless all three disappeared at the same time.
That's what I was thinking, of course, while secretly wishing that my girlfriend Clarisa, Franco's sister, were as beautiful as Mecha, but that was impossible. The Espinozas were the ugly ducklings of Lavalle's district, the bad guys, the oddballs who avoided contact with others, stubbornly keeping their misfortunes to themselves—misfortunes that were and would

become many. Country men, some half-mad, others obsessive, germinating the seeds of death in their souls while they trained in the art of killing the very land they tried to cultivate . They were the kind who kill what they love, and that love is as dark as a cesspool.

Mecha had her mother's gentleness and her same intelligence for words and languages, but she liked to spend time with the men, learn the trade of the countryside with her father and with Franco, and when she returned home, Arturo would read books to her, and she would fall asleep with her head resting on one of his shoulders, cradled by the vibration of his voice to the rhythm of the phrases.

Clarisa, on the other hand, was a pure, uneducated country girl. She was always with her three brothers, and the only female figure, her mother, had no time for anything other than the house and for them, the men of the family, who were troublesome and quarrelsome.

I loved my girlfriend, of course. Clarisa was pretty, not as much as Mecha. She was still naive and mischievous, like a little girl even though she was almost Mercedes's age. She was shorter, with reddish hair and tanned by the sun, unlike Mecha, who had very fair skin and brown hair, and was tall and slender, about the same height as a boy well into his teens. Clarisa played in the fields, and the tasks she started were never finished. What could she possibly do well, having never been taught anything because her brothers monopolized everything—attention and worries? My girlfriend Clarisa was like a partridge, running, sneaking, spying, destroying whatever she tried to fix, and then stopping with a smile that one could only be indulgent towards.

Clarisa adored her father and loved her brothers, and that's where I came in, diverting attention from those relationships that harbored the nascent disease. Before anything happened, her mother acted as matchmaker in our affairs. I was a promising young man, of course, with my family on my shoulders, knowing that my shoulders possessed the strength of the good wood used to build a coffin, so that they would last underground almost as long as eternity.

That afternoon, I don't think Mecha even looked at me, so engrossed was she in her conversation with Franco, who was explaining something about sheep, miming holding them by the hide, as if trying to show her how to shear them. None of the three deigned to look at me, least of all Arturo,

who, oblivious to his cousin's conversation, sat reading with his feet up on the portico railing. I walked past to the kitchen, where Enzo Sanhueza had left someone in charge of providing refreshments for the visitors and suppliers while he took care of business. Then he shook my hand and asked me to give my regards to my future father-in-law, with whom he'd had disputes that were always settled by him, who had everything, giving the benefit of the doubt to Don Pedro Espinoza, who had nothing. Clarisa's father, who burned land and appropriated it, was a sick and dangerous man. In the rancher's eyes, I also saw the task they all entrusted to me: to rescue Clarisa.

That's why my love for Mecha was purely platonic, so much so that she didn't even remember what I looked like, barely even my name, and the second time we saw each other she didn't recognize me. They were traveling to Buenos Aires, and I remember that the first time Mecha was excited to return to the ranch, telling me about what she had seen: the buildings and the asphalt streets, the lights and the movie theaters, and the university where Arturo planned to study after finishing high school in our town. Meanwhile, my relationship with Clarisa was growing stronger, and I would visit the poor Espinoza ranch. I would run into Franco, who was Raúl's eldest son, Don Pedro's firstborn, but Franco worked and lived on the Sanhueza ranch and was gradually distancing himself from his family. He had a younger brother he cared about. Sometimes we would chat, almost in monosyllables, enough for us to understand each other's misfortunes. I, condemned to a girl-woman who would never grow up, he, knowing himself to always be relegated by his class and his family.

The Espinoza threat materialized in more fires. The municipality intervened, but old Don Pedro had the luck of the unfortunate and the advantage of having a wife protected by the priest, who, despite being from a small town, Father Macabeo knew how to exert his influence on the authorities. When the old man died and his sons became the suspects, not even the influence of old Dr. Ruiz could help.

Then came the fire where the priest died. The arsonist was already dead, but his sons had learned the lesson they'd been taught for so long, and like their father's sons, they escaped unscathed, at least as far as the law was concerned. They say it was revenge, that the Espinoza boys had sworn vengeance, that the priest had slept with their mother like he did with all

the other girls in town, and who knows what else. All of that was known and considered just another thing, as commonplace as the trees and the river water.
But Clarisa was also involved in the fire, like the busybody she was, meddling in everything, missing the old man buried in the place the brothers had burned. She was the sacrificial victim, the providential scapegoat for the sins of the Espinozas, who in the end didn't atone for anything.
Clarisa didn't die, but her entire body was burned. Bedridden for life, I became her husband from then on, and she, the cross in a coffin carried on my shoulders, a symbol of my family heritage, my legacy and my curse.

2

I could have backed out of my promise, which was never really a promise, but simply a tacit agreement based on mutual feelings that even we didn't consider definitive. She was still a child, emotionally speaking, and I was a shameless opportunist who, seeing an easy way out, let myself be swept away by circumstances.
But when they showed her to me burned, there in the scorched field, surrounded by police, gendarmes, doctors, and local politicians who didn't even look at her because they were more interested in the priest's corpse, smelling burnt like a calf on a spit, her helplessness struck me as something destined for me. Accustomed to my family's pronouncements, the feeling I slowly learned to discern with time and experience, that task of messengers and harvesters of death, made the idea of predestination, of the irrevocable, familiar to me.
There was no going back for Clarisa's body, just as there was no going back for the deeds done between us. Feelings, contrary to what many believe, cannot be reversed. They change in intensity, perhaps, they metamorphose into other, more or less dissimilar feelings, but they cannot be abolished. The oft-repeated phrase "nothing dies, everything is transformed" is so stupidly obvious that it's shameful humanity ever felt proud of having

discovered it. Death itself is nothing more than a transformation, and what we lament and mourn is only the form we knew, now different, now something else entirely, but the same substance. Man, however, intoxicated by the sensations of his body, can hardly conceive of what lies beyond or within his senses.

Squatting beside Clarisa's body, feeling the smoky pastureland around us, the cries of the women mourning the priest's death, burned as if in a biblical punishment, the anguished gaze of the brothers, interrogated by the police who obtained no answer other than that always confused expression typical of all the Espinozas; I say, surrounded by the damp sky of that morning, seeing Clarisa's open eyes, her clothes singed and wet from the buckets with which they had tried to extinguish the fire on her, and the smell of the flesh and her pain, I touched the fingers of a black hand that felt nothing, at least now, at that beginning of her torment, and I felt myself on the threshold of death for the first time, having just emerged from adolescence, and I knew that this was the event that had been destined for me to begin my work. The Goncalvez family did not train their children; they simply sent them to the front lines, and in the middle of the field, over the piles of dead bodies, we climbed towards the great Marshal who, above all of us, contemplated the desolate landscape created by his design.

They took her home, treated the burns all over her body, and cut off her singed hair. Naked, she didn't look it. The ash covering her was washed off with cold water amidst desolate cries that set everyone on edge: siblings, doctors, neighbors— except me, who held her by her now-bald skull, almost the only part of her body where her skin remained intact, thanks to the abundant hair that had been sacrificed to the fire, red like Clarisa's hair. I pressed my lips to her bare skull as she rolled her eyes, looking at me, trying not to cry because even tears irritated the skin on her face, until she realized that the grimaces she made to hold them back were pulling at her burned skin like torture. She didn't know what to do to avoid every movement, no matter how trivial, every touch from others, every speck of dust or drop of water that grazed her. Even her breathing was torture. And it wasn't as if he could speak or even open his lips a little. I understood this as I stroked his skull and saw his eyes like two compasses guiding my

fingers across the map of his skull, stained like fragments of sea and land, of erupting volcanoes and tsunamis trying to extinguish them.
Their screams, good God, how can I calm them? How can I avoid hearing them?
Everyone in the room knew, and they were looking at me. Even the mother, who was no longer crying and had decided never to touch her again.
Days and weeks passed, and people gradually left the room. The mother wept for something we didn't understand: the death of Father Maccabee. And the brothers, scattered, slipped away into the anonymity of the vast countryside, where a man is an ant, and ants are easily trampled, dissolved into dust and earth.
I was left alone with her. If I had wanted to leave, it was too late. Her eyes pleaded with me, and I misunderstood. Did she want me to stay? Did she want me to end her life?
She screamed, though she didn't want to, not because of the pity she might provoke in others—that didn't matter to her—because her soul held no trace of conscience. Her soul was her body laid bare, the remnants of skin healing over the ulcers that the burns had become over a long period, the pus draining from the infections, and the flies that landed on her because she couldn't tolerate any bandages. The ointments the women from the village had brought had only calmed her for an hour or two, until she wanted nothing more to do with them, because even in times of peace, thoughts of war were a time for her.
She whispered sounds and words, but her body was like a stake, unwilling to move. I cleaned her up, fed her with a bottle, and later with a spoon when she could begin to open her mouth. Water and nothing but water; I lived surrounded by buckets that I changed constantly, and rags that I threw away after using them. I don't know where so many rags came from; the women brought them to me, the men handed them to me after tearing them into pieces, which I used to clean Clarisa's body.
Once, Dr. Ruiz, who was only there out of obligation, told me that if she had survived all that time it was because of me, because of my dedication. He didn't call it love; the truth is, I would have kicked him out if he had. But he, as a doctor, also knew a few things about the human heart.
She was my wife, and still is. We didn't get married; we lived together as husband and wife for those first few months, which stretched to a little

over a year until I took her to Buenos Aires. But before the trip, I brought her from her parents' house, which was a complete desolation, to my house in the city, or town, as we all called Lavalle. It was one of the first houses that some of the Goncalves family had built more than fifty years before: old, colonial, cold, but spacious and comfortable like a miniature Paradise, a sunny winter paradise, where the rooms were large and filled with echoes that escaped through the doors opening onto the inner arcade surrounding the patio, in the center of which stood a cistern with pulleys that creaked in the wind, and sometimes for no apparent reason.

I put her in the large double bed in the biggest room, the one at the far end, whose door was the first you saw after passing through the long, narrow vestibule that began at the cobblestone sidewalk. A quiet, heavyset woman helped me clean her, turning her over on the mattress so roughly that Clarisa didn't feel the pain of the movement, but rather the atrocity of the subsequent immobility. It was the only way, of course. And at night I sometimes kept watch sitting in a corner, or lay down beside her, our bodies separated by pillows that wouldn't hurt her. Her body was slowly becoming a complete, wrinkled scar. At times, she resembled a snake. Always naked, she only tolerated silk sheets, but she shivered with cold and screamed when I tried to put a blanket on her.

The nights of the second half of the year arrived. The remedies, injections, and IV drips that Dr. Ruiz and many others who came after her gave her—doctors who looked at her like a freak, a phenomenon not of science but of some sinister, supernatural power—did nothing to help her. They calmed her for a while, but it grew shorter and shorter. It wasn't her skin that hurt anymore, but the pain beneath the scabs that were slowly peeling off, which she couldn't stop from itching so badly that she screamed and screamed, begging me to scratch them with my fingernails, until one night her pleas became so intense that I did. And she bled, her exposed veins staining the sheets, and the foul-smelling pus that had long filled the room, and the woman who watched us, frightened, peered out the door.

So I decided to ignore her pleas to end her pain. I longed to strangle her once and for all, for she seemed to be mocking me, displaying the strength of her throat, as if to say, " *See, see, with the only thing I have left that's good, I'll torture you, Lisandro.*" But she asked for nothing more than

death, the one thing I couldn't give her. I didn't possess the power to take life with my hands, which were merely the arms of a graveyard excavator. The morphine no longer had any effect on her; they had increased the dosage to dangerous levels, but she continued screaming from internal pains that no one could decipher. Ruiz and the others recommended taking her to a large hospital, but their arguments lacked any conviction. Perhaps they would sedate her with anesthesia , or induce a coma. How long would she be like that? Perhaps months or years. But you, Lisandro, at least you can live your life, they told me. And what would I use it for if not to take care of her? I replied. Do you love her that much? I laughed inwardly, only allowing a smile to betray me, a smile that could easily be mistaken for any genuine feeling.

I don't love her, and yet I need her. She is my unfinished task, my unfinished business, my constant thought.

Guilt, perhaps?

Resentment, most likely.

The bond that tied me to Clarisa was made of a material as strong as hatred, which helps the object of its obsession avoid dying to suffer, because pain is expiation. I convinced myself that I was the necessary instrument, the obligated messenger for her to atone for the past and future murders of the Espinozas. Perhaps she wouldn't die until the family disappeared or entered the impossible state of self-denial and beatitude.

Not all Goncalves are undertakers.

I contacted Macario Sanhueza, the veterinarian. I found him at the ranch, treating a heifer that was draining parasites from its open belly.

-What's up, doctor?

He looked at me with a furrowed expression on his face, stained with sweat.

-Getting involved...and you, Lisandro? Any news...? -He stared at me, perhaps thinking that Clarisa had died.

-It's still the same, doctor.

At that very moment, the heifer died.

"Damn it!" said Macario. "These new kids don't know anything. They let her grow up like that since her mother gave birth to her. You could see worms the size of snakes in the shit. There's nothing to be done about it."

He ordered the farmhands who looked at him like idiots to sacrifice the cow.
-And burn all this hay and seal it up tight. Don't let the sheep or the dogs in.
He put his arm around my shoulders and we left the shed.
"You see, kid, I'm going to have to vaccinate almost all the cattle as a precaution. If disaster doesn't start in three weeks, we're saved."
-If you want...
"No, Lisandro, you've got your own thing going on. Here, the farmhands help me, my brother and Mecha, of course. If you saw her... you can't count on Arturo. He writes poetry and gets bored stiff, but I can't blame him, he's doing what I wish I had done."
It was known that the veterinarian's wife was no longer at the ranch. After the first few years, she didn't fit in; she was practically a servant, a farmhand's wife who couldn't read. Arturo probably didn't even remember her. Often, father and son could be seen sitting in their rocking chairs, enjoying the exoticism of autumn nights under the trees, as the cold began to set in, both smoking pipes. The father gazed at the countryside, as if seeing the city in the distance; the son, with a book on his lap, turned the pages like those falling from the eucalyptus trees at that time of day. The scent of the trees enveloped them, and the tobacco was only in their lungs, overcome by the smell of autumn.
I was almost the same age as Arturo, but I was the opposite of his son.
-You're a very wise boy, Lisandro. What am I saying! You're a man now.
We stopped at the gate and sat down to watch the bonfire where the farmhands were throwing in the remains of the heifer, the hay, and the rags. The smoke was black, then white, and rose into the sky, spreading over the fields.
-Clarisa can't stand the pain anymore, and I don't know what to give her... I thought about what you give the horses, those serums, or injections for the pain...
-Damn, kid, you already know that half of those doses would kill her.
"I'm not sure. They've already given her very high doses of morphine, and she's still alive and in pain. I don't know what's wrong with her, but I don't want to take her to any hospital where they'll put her on tubes and leave her a living death. Yes, I know what you're going to say... but now she talks

to me, even if it's just a little, and she understands me when I speak to her and stroke her. Do you know that her hair has grown back? It's not red like before; it's so blond it looks white..."
Macario lit his pipe, spat, and gazed at the bonfire.
-I'll come by tonight, Lisandro, and we'll see what I can do.

At ten o'clock at night he arrived in the city with the large briefcase. And before he could knock on the door, he heard the shouts, interspersed with broken moans with which Clarisa was regaining her strength. The sound was characteristic of those whose lungs hardened like channels and tunnels or catacombs buried beneath the bones of their chest. Sometimes hissing like wind passing through caverns, suddenly interrupted, suddenly abrupt with bursts of release.
I opened the door and we walked down the hallway, then across the patio, and into the room. Basins, piles of sheets and rags, the table covered with bottles, ampoules, and syringes. The large woman was sitting, her hands in her lap, half asleep. Clarisa's eyes were open, her face a mask of horror, the same expression I'd seen shortly after the fire. Her face was a scar that would never change, and Macario couldn't fathom what interpretations I could draw to be sure she understood and was speaking to me.
He examined her just like that, naked as always, but her dress was the scars that covered her entire body. A woman's intimacy no longer existed. She was a piece of anatomy that continued to breathe, nothing more. The bark of a tree cut down on the bed, heavy and motionless.

She, however, moaned and screamed, barely moving her lips, but her throat moved, her Adam's apple rose and fell as she screamed, swallowed, and breathed.
-Does he eat?
He stated.
-Did you measure his urine output?
I nodded.
-Does it move a little?
I shook my head.
-If I speak to him, will he understand me?
-And what are you going to ask her? What do you want to know? Just seeing her and listening to her is enough.

-Did you think about…?
I shrugged, walked over to the bed, and took Clarisa's hand.
-She asks me for it every day, doctor.
The woman had left. Outside, a bus was passing by, the last one of the night. A dog was barking, and others answered it.
Macario approached me, put his hands on my shoulders, and shook me a little, amicably, as if scolding his son.
-Why didn't you tell me before, kid?
He grabbed the briefcase, took out a large syringe, the kind he used for his animals. He filled it with the contents of five ampoules of an analgesic, a sedative, anything that would quiet Clarisa's screams.
He took out an elastic cord and fastened it around the patient's arm. Patiently, he searched for the faintest signs of a vein. The skin was a map of interconnected rivulets and furrows in various shades of red and blue. When he thought he had found the path of a vein, he inserted the needle. The tough skin was difficult to penetrate and resisted the needle.
The needle bent.
He switched to a very thick one, the kind he used for horses. It went in, finally. The thick liquid, which would have made any man or woman kick and resist, did nothing. When he'd injected half the syringe, he realized it was no longer going into the vein, probably hardened or blocked by fibrosis. He kept injecting; there was no reason to stop. The arm was swelling. When he finished, he put everything back in the tattered leather case. He stood there for a while, stroking the leather, thinking about the French veterinarian who had given it to him. The man had a bad reputation; everyone in the province spoke ill of him, but he was an expert in his field. He'd given him the old suitcase that had seen so many things and rested on so many dirty tables. And how many strange things had been put inside it. Sometimes, the lingering traces of guilt were hidden, other times, the remorse, and then it was emptied into the open field, or into the course of a stream with tall grass on the sides and a flow so slow that it allowed the thrown garbage to procreate.
-Call me if you need anything, you know, kid.
He left with the briefcase in one hand, the unlit pipe in the other, walking quietly in his muddy boots.

Clarisa's voice faded, and I was frightened by the silence. I touched her swollen arm, shook her shoulders. I couldn't be sure she was dead, just as I couldn't be sure that was my wish. The silence, after so many months, was like an invisible monster lurking in the house from all sides.
I rested my head on her chest and listened to the wheezing of air in her lungs. Then I felt relief, and that the monster was receding. At last, Clarisa wasn't suffering, for the first time in almost a year. I began to speak to her, even though her eyes were closed. I stroked her face, combed her hair, took the dresses she had bought for the wedding but never got to wear, and placed them on her body, waiting for her to open her eyes. Then I threw them on a chair and sat down on the bed.
I spoke to her, saying everything I hadn't said before so as not to upset her: my fears, my anxieties, my doubts. I thought about the times we made love, some in the fields, others in that house. Fearful and careful that she wouldn't be seen coming in. Then I ran my hands over her hardened skin, which was unlike any other woman's. Clarisa was unlike any other. Her skin was a maelstrom of reliefs and shapes, furrows, mountains, winding paths, wells. And at each geographical feature on her map, I stopped and explored. I undressed, parted Clarisa's legs, and penetrated her as before, but now she was a different woman, wiser because she had suffered. I felt her body tremble, and when she looked up, she was looking at me.
Clarisa, of course, continued to live, and Macario Sanhueza couldn't explain it. In fact, he had to reproach himself for what he had done, because the injected arm became gangrenous and had to be amputated. And with the amputation, the pain began anew.
What was that woman's body made of? he must have wondered as he operated right there in the room. The old woman wrapped the dead arm in a sheet and went out to the patio to throw it in the cistern, which was its only purpose now. When he finished bandaging the stump, Macario washed his hands, hugged me, half-crying with grief and incomprehension. To his astonishment, it was I who comforted him.
"Don't get so worked up, doctor," I said, patting him on the back.
Sanhueza left, surely mulling that he would never mess with a human being again.

3

I took her to Buenos Aires in the summer, before the holidays. I closed up the old house, with my mother's blessing—she was the absolute owner of everything, overseeing everything I did from São Paulo. I was her only son, and I couldn't spend more than a day or two with her without some whirlwind of disagreements erupting. Undoubtedly, she and her partners were too strong women to have a man by their side who was nothing more than the one who had given them offspring. And then, the sons, like César Gonzaga and me, tended to be weak, if that's what you'd call the eternal doubt, the constant dissatisfaction with the legacy they'd received.
That's why we talked on the phone, and she gave me a thousand recommendations for apartments or houses in Buenos Aires. I was away from her most of the year, because I only came to oversee the waste management business very occasionally, and as for the wakes, I left those to the others. I could listen and agree over the phone, and then I did what I wanted. After all, my life, like the burden I carried, was exclusively mine.
With the money I had, I rented an apartment in an old, three-story building in the Barracas neighborhood, on Irala Street. It had a raised sidewalk with a small staircase that almost everyone avoided, preferring to walk down to the street. There, at the back of that spacious, cold apartment, with its high ceilings and whitewashed walls and ceilings to hide the damp, I placed the bed I'd bought at a nearby furniture store, and laid Clarisa on it. The move caused quite a stir in the neighborhood; curious onlookers stopped to watch as they brought in the bed with the sick woman on it. They whispered, their expressions barely concealed, looked at me, and probably thought: *poor man,* or *what could he have done to her.* That same day, late in the day, I went out to buy groceries for dinner and to stock up the refrigerator. The apartment, on the ground floor, had a small back patio with old, broken flowerpots, hard-packed soil, a few cacti, and lots of weeds growing in the corners of the walls. The bedroom was enormous and felt empty with nothing but the wardrobe and the bed. In the dining room, I put a table and two chairs. The kitchen was narrow, with a plaster ceiling and

cracked paint that forced me to be careful not to let it fall into the pot. The bathroom was full of indelible stains on the vinyl flooring laid over the old tiles, long lines of limescale and grime on the fixtures, and the large mirror was covered in rust.
I lay down in the bathtub after dinner and giving Clarisa her morphine injection, which gave me a little rest, enough to give me the illusion of peace for at least a couple of hours, sometimes much less. The water took a while to heat up because of the old faucets, but even the warmth felt good. Two cockroaches were strolling across the bathroom floor, and I drifted off to sleep as I followed their trail. When I woke up to Clarisa's scream, one of the bugs was on the edge of the tub, watching me, rubbing its front legs together, or whatever it was, I don't know. I got up, put my foot on it, feeling the crunching under my sole, and said, " *I'm coming."*

Then there was knocking at the door, and then the doorbell, which, broken, rang loudly but with short, sharp squeals, almost like Clarisa's moans. It must be the neighbors, I figured. They needed to adjust, but it wasn't time yet. My " *I'm coming"* was enough to quell both complaints, the one from the bedroom and the one from the door. I put on my robe and slippers. I looked through the peephole; it was a boy my age, maybe even younger, waiting with his hands in his pockets and wearing a tank top.
"Hello," he said when I opened the door. He was shy, or maybe he was just pretending. "Excuse me, but the neighbors, you know, asked me to come and complain. I just got home from work, but the people on the other floors are kind of angry. They're worried about the lady."
He raised his arms as if indifferent or unwilling to share other opinions. His t-shirt was stained with sweat, his chest hair was sparse and grew in separate patches. His trousers were unbuttoned, and a sliver of his white briefs peeked out carelessly.
-And they're going to call the police, right?
"No, no…" but he wanted to say yes. "Look, we all have our problems here, and we don't like cops, you know what I mean, sir…"
-Lisando Goncálvez, at your service.
He shook my hand with a firm grip that gave me confidence.
-Oscar Méndez, I agree. If it's not that, it's because it's a quiet neighborhood, you know, nobody bothers anyone else, but the lady's shouting…

I grabbed him by the arm and led him to the room. From the doorway, without needing to turn on the ceiling light, which was just a small lamp hanging from a wire, we saw Clarisa's silhouette against the mattress. She was already moving a little on her own, but they were just gentle shifts. Sometimes, she reminded me of a salamander.
The boy put a hand to his forehead, ruffling his hair, and then covered his mouth. I took him to the bathroom to make him vomit. He didn't, but he asked permission to pee. As I was about to leave, he said:
"You don't need to leave, my friend, now I understand." The stream of water fell into the bottom of the toilet bowl as he spoke. He flushed the old chain, which sounded like a grating waterfall of dirty water. "You were lucky to rent this apartment. As you can see, it's the one the owner kept in the best condition, which is why it stayed empty all year. Since it's more expensive..."
The kid was already trying to squeeze some money out of me, in exchange for calming down the other neighbors, or maybe it was all just his idea. He buttoned his shirt. We went to the kitchen, I offered him a coffee, and he asked if I had anything stronger.
-I just arrived, Méndez, I barely had time to buy anything tonight.
-Excuse me, friend. And what happened to the poor woman, if I may ask?
We spent over an hour talking. He said goodbye with a friendly hug. At the door, I asked him:

-And how much is my silence going to cost me, Méndez?

He laughed, almost, and suddenly, taking on the confidence of years of age, he put an arm around my shoulders and patted my chest.
"Don't be distrustful, Lisandro. I propose a deal: when you achieve that silence so precious to you and your wife, then you pay me. Is that clear?"
We shook hands, and I watched him walk down the hall and into the stairwell. After closing the door, I lay down with Clarisa and began telling her about what I'd seen in the neighborhood—the people and the shops, the kids and the dogs—and about the neighbor's visit. She moaned, but my voice was like the peaceful sound of a quiet asphalt street passing beneath the windows of our new house.

Méndez worked as a moving truck driver with an old truck. He worked alone, he said, because the earnings weren't enough to share. He was

almost always hired from any neighborhood in the capital or the greater Buenos Aires area, except for the furniture store where I had bought my furniture. He wasn't strong, but he put a lot of effort into carrying the moving crates, and above all, he had great ideas for getting the furniture through narrow hallways, doorways, steep staircases, or even elevators. We laughed at his stories when he came to visit me at night, after dinner. He had done everything, and nothing disgusted him. Sometimes, smoking a joint, which I had also gotten into the habit of, he would drift off into a dream, then wake up startled. Once he asked me:
-What are you afraid of, Lisandro?
"Me?" I shrugged, poured myself some gin, and after a while I said:
"To life, Méndez. Look at my wife, every day she asks me to kill her, but what for, you tell me? She pays for the peace of her soul with the pains of her body, that's what I learned about death. Many times I saw my uncles, even my mother, cleaning the bodies of the dead, and they never come out clean. On the other hand, every time I wash Clarisa's skin, deformed by scars, cleaning the furrows between the hard wrinkles, she calms down a little. It's like making love to her, I don't know if you understand..."
"I understand you, Lisandro, I think better than you do yourself. The thing is, you don't want to accept what you believe is a tragedy, but it's actually a blessing, who knows? And tell me, man, are you just going to manage with your hand?" he asked, touching his penis under his work overalls.
"Sometimes," I said. "Excuse me, but I'm a bit prudish to talk about that."
-I've noticed, my friend, you have a good education, but above all you're steeped in Catholic dogma, guilt and all that... I'm going to take you to a dive I know one of these days, don't worry, it's all clean, and besides, if you go with me, they'll give you a discount and treat you like royalty.
Just then we heard Clarisa calling from the bedroom. She was speaking loudly now, and we could understand almost everything she said. We had to change her bedclothes because they were soiled with feces. Méndez was helping me then, because he had done it a couple of times before and moved Clarisa's body gently and effortlessly. I think she smiled, remembering the nightmares she'd had when that big woman from Lavalle moved her around.
Méndez behaved like a gentleman nurse, not even glancing at Clarisa's nakedness. I thanked him for all of that, and felt indebted for that

seemingly selfless friendship. The debt was revealed later, the accounts hidden and meticulously recorded in the drawers of his mind—multiple drawers, full of grime and strange things, locked with keys forged only when the locksmith of his ignominy decided, like a Pandora's box, perhaps, flooding the world around him with the excretions of his soul.

The following Saturday night, I heard a car horn. I looked out the door and saw a Chevrolet with chrome bumpers, but dents along the side. The rhythm of an American ballad drifted from the radio through the window; the saxophone vibrated until it reached a cry of desperate pain. It was Méndez, a cigarette between his lips, wearing a black shirt and matching suit, and a hat that made me smile.
-Come on, Lisandro!
He'd warned me the night before; we were going to a brothel across from the Riachuelo. The famous dive he'd mentioned. I turned off the light in the room. Clarisa was resting, enjoying the dose of cocaine Méndez sold me—cheap, and plenty of it, according to him, out of friendship. I put on my overcoat because the autumn chill was starting at the end of March, and went out into the street. I jumped over the little ladder that kept the onlookers away and got into the car.
-So, how's it going? How's Clarisa?
-First, she was euphoric, even laughing despite her face hurting. Then, she either fell asleep or looked at me with relief.
-I told you it would do him good.
I complimented his car; it didn't look like he earned that much as a freight driver.
"Pssst," he said simply. "A gift from a grateful guy, I'll tell you about it sometime."
We started driving around for a few minutes. The mist from the stream hid half of the iron bridge, the rest peeking out like a prehistoric monster. We stopped in front of a black gate, got out, Méndez clapped his hands a couple of times, enough to make the surrounding dogs start barking, and the dog inside—that is, the big man with the sinister face who admitted or kicked out anyone who tried to enter—peered out of a square opening.
"Good evening," said Méndez. "I've brought customers, Gervasio."

Gervasio opened the door and let us into an open courtyard, half bare of trees and full of sheet metal and disassembled cars.
"But where did you bring me?" I whispered in his ear.
He signaled me to be quiet. From the back, the sound of a record player playing a tango could be heard, and light could be seen through the slats of a shutter.
Inside, a couple of women came to greet us. There was a lot of marijuana smoke, and several shirtless guys were groping the girls sitting on their laps. He introduced me to them, at least the ones he knew; they were always changing, he said. He only greeted the guys with respectful, distant nods. He whispered in my ear:
"Don't talk to anyone, Lisandro, and check your pockets when you get dressed on your way out. The girls obey, and these scoundrels give orders. The cops come to screw over the unsuspecting, and then they throw them in jail if they don't have any money. But everyone has something, you know, a little car, a little house, a teenage daughter. You can build a lot with very little, Lisandro."
A stunning woman, with huge breasts and a big ass, pressed herself against me and licked my face like a dog. Yes, I thought, I missed things like this: the shame lost in the street and doing things without fanfare or glory. I grabbed her by the waist and we went into a tiny booth, about three by four meters, where the bed took up almost the entire space, but before we went in, just past the doorway, there was someone kneeling, giving oral sex to a chubby guy with such pale skin that he glowed in the semi-darkness, and that's how I recognized him. He looked up, distracted, of course, and when he realized who I was, he tried to get up, but the other guy sulked.
-What are you doing, what are you doing? I haven't finished yet!
The voice was unmistakable. Gervasio, good old Gervasio, who worked as a doorman and bouncer, also indulged himself. I left them in peace, wondering why a guy like César Gonzaga, with his money and his business and military aristocracy, all of that amalgamated and fused in his well-dressed demeanor and polite speech, was hiding in a dive like that.
I couldn't stay more than an hour, so I got dressed, following Méndez's advice. When I opened the guardhouse door, I found César waiting for me, smoking, looking embarrassed. We barely knew each other, mostly from the time I attended the same school in the Belgrano neighborhood where

he completed all of high school, because I was constantly being moved from place to place depending on my mother's whims. He was a reserved type, always ashamed, as if asking permission, which contrasted sharply with his childish and effeminate appearance, or rather, his affected mannerisms. His humility and class pride combined to create a personality that was hard to swallow, which is why he was always alone, and perhaps why he didn't frequent more upscale brothels, where people of his own social standing might recognize him.
But there I was, the son of one of her mother's partners in the funeral home.
-Look, Lisandro...
"No, no, César, don't show me anything. I've already seen it, and you have nothing to envy the others for." I couldn't be such a son of a bitch as to tell him I had nothing to brag about. I was beaming with happiness; that half hour with the whore had made me funny.
-Don't tell me anything, you see me, I also have sex in this dive.
I looked around for Méndez; he was feeling a bit dizzy and was surprised to see us chatting.
-So you knew each other, huh?
"Just from school, our moms work together," I said.
-Look at that, what a coincidence, it's a small world, Lisandro.
-Come on, Méndez, let's get out of here, I can't leave Clarisa alone all night.
César followed us. What did he want? He got in the car to hold Méndez in the back seat, who was moving around excitedly and half-crazy, who knows what the hell he'd mixed. I started the car, and while we were driving I watched him in the rearview mirror. They knew each other, sure, Méndez sold drugs to César, but so what?
The three of us went home. Between the two of us, we covered Méndez's mouth and took off his shoes so as not to wake the neighbors, who already disliked us. We threw him down on the old rug in the dining room, and César and I went to the kitchen.
"Thank you," I said.
-You're welcome, Lisandro. I think we're better friends than ever from today onwards, right?
I laughed.

-No problem, Cesar, but why did you mess with this guy?
"I need it to get me what my old man would deny me, even though he's involved in that and worse things. What can I tell you, dear, if you already know?"
-Morphine…
-The white snow, too. It hurts a lot, Lisandro. I have cancer, dear, cancer in my ass, well, in my anus, what can I do? Bad habits punish the parts that cause the sin, like in the Bible, right? And you know what's the funniest thing of all? My mother is already planning the funeral, and on top of that, she's playing the victim.
"And how is that?" I asked, refilling for the second time the wine glasses I had bought for some occasional visit of a higher class than Méndez.
When she told the others about me, they refused, and she's going to leave the business, that's what she told me. She's just waiting for me to die so she can be sure of the others' disloyalty. Then, yes, she'll play the victim and cry all she needs to, acting weak and sick. I've already imagined the whole scenario, you see? Because I have the script she wrote when I told her my story. Between her and my old man, what a couple of lectures they gave each other, one of them really giving me a hard time, the other protecting me without letting go of my balls.
I had never heard Cesar speak like that before, but I realized that I had never been his friend until now.
"I'm going to bed," I told him .
"Go ahead, Lisandro. I feel for you, man, and I admire you, my dear. Everyone in the family is talking about you and what you're doing. Even your mother is proud of you, because you've found your place and your purpose; that's what I heard mine repeating at some wake, I'm sure."
Look at how things turn out, I thought, my mom's so proud of me. I hugged César, and he told me he'd always liked me a little, ever since school.
"Thank goodness you never told me," I joked. "Back then I would have punched you in a way I'd be ashamed of now."
-I know, that's why I didn't tell you. I loved you too much to allow you to have that bad memory.
In the morning, neither of them was there. Clarisa began her morning whimpering, and I looked at the clock on the bedside table to see how

many hours were left until Méndez brought me the next little packet of the elixir of forgetfulness.

4

By the end of the following winter, Caesar died.
One early morning the phone rang insistently, but I ignored it. Clarisa had been in particularly unbearable pain, and I hadn't been able to sleep a wink all night. It must have been just after 3:00 a.m. when a car horn blared outside. Dogs barked, and I heard the neighbors' voices. I looked out and saw Méndez's car, and he was gesturing for me to come with him. He looked annoyed, and I decided to go along with it. I made sure Clarisa was still asleep thanks to the cocktail I'd injected her with, went outside, and got into the car. I didn't even have time to protest when Méndez said:
"Are you deaf that you're not answering the phone, man? I need your help one time, please, after all, he's your friend, not mine..."
-What the hell are you talking about? I couldn't sleep all night and you come here yelling at me at three in the morning…
He had taken the familiar path to the riverside brothel.
"They called me over an hour ago, Lisandro. César finally died. They didn't know who else to call but us, his cronies."
-And what about an ambulance?
-Do me a favor and don't be such an idiot, or is it because you're half asleep?
We arrived. In the largest room, if you could call it that, Gervasio greeted us stark naked. César was in bed, his back to us. Méndez placed a hand on the goalkeeper's shoulder.
-What happened? You hit him really hard this time, didn't you?
Gervasio had the face of a frightened boy, with an unkempt beard and a bald head.
"It hurt him, but he wanted more," she replied.
-I imagine...so he finished it to his liking.

Méndez's mocking expression was suffocating me, so I approached César's body. It was cold, of course, and there was blood on his ass.
Between the two of us—because Gervasio had sat down whimpering with his hands over his face—we cleaned his body with water from a basin that one of the girls had filled in the patio sink. We wrapped him in the sheets and carried him to the car, this time with Gervasio's help. César was heavy, not only because he was chubby but also because of his dead weight.
"And now?" I asked Méndez. "What great idea do you have to get rid of the burden we saved the holy cloister from which we just emerged?"
He let out a laugh that I thought would wake César, who was lying in the back seat. Outside, the fog at least hid us, but it would soon lift, and the only gray hairs were the barking dogs.
"That's what I like about you, Lisandro, that you keep your spirits up despite everything." He rested his right hand on my knee for the rest of the trip, except when he was shifting gears, and said to me:
-Let's go to the parents' house, you know the mother, and you'll explain it to her. You're good at that, my dear.
She had thought of everything, I suppose she should be grateful in that situation. And her mother too, of course. She couldn't allow a scandal to erupt in the small society to which César Gonzaga belonged, the distress for her above all, and the disgrace for the old man who, according to what they said, wasn't in very good health anymore.
We stopped in front of one of the mansions in Belgrano; there was a guard at the entrance gate. The soldier approached us, rifle in hand. I gave him my ID; it was urgent, I told him.
-Get down.
He looked at the back seat, got nervous. He patted me down for weapons right there, and Méndez did too. Luckily I'd left the revolver I'd seen him with sometimes at home, but with his body in the back, it was enough to get us into trouble.
-Please, this is Mrs. Larriere's son.
The soldier barely heard me when the gate opened and Eva, the mother, came out wearing a kind of negligee and with her hair half disheveled.
-Can you tell me what's going on? Lisandro, you? What are you doing here? Did something happen to your mom?
-No, ma'am, it's César.

Oh, God, another mess he's gotten himself into. Wait while I order them to open the gate and you can bring the car in, with your friend, I don't know who he is but if he's with you…
I hadn't seen anything yet, it was better that way, we had already caused a lot of trouble on the sidewalk and it wasn't even dawn yet.
When we entered and the gate closed behind us, she went to the window and saw César in the back. Without being too alarmed, she said:
-I see he took too much, I told him a thousand times that with all the medicine he takes…
-Eva…he's dead, Eva.
He stared at me, the backdrop of the old house behind his frail, aging frame. César wasn't a kid either; he had a ten-year-old daughter, and he was separated, of course, a long time ago.
She opened the back door, looked at her son, touched him, sensing his nakedness beneath the cloths that wrapped him like a bundle, similar to the corpses into which rebels against the homeland were often turned by those charged with protecting it. Her husband had been one of these latter, Caesar's own father.
I took her by the shoulders, she leaned against my chest for a moment, and said:
-Let's go inside and you can explain.
- Yes, it's cold, Eva. Oscar, please…
-Don't worry, Lisandro, I'll wait right here.
In the living room, she turned on the lights, and the immediate effect was to reveal things that had been dormant. It was like seeing each one startled amidst the abrupt light that always brought bad news at that hour. A light suddenly switched on, or a phone call in the middle of the night, waking us with a start and our hearts in our mouths.
I explained everything to her, including the details. She looked at me the whole time with a serious, proud, and resigned expression. General Gonzaga had already died a few months earlier, so she was alone, except for the women's society to which she belonged.
"I did everything to protect him, Lisandro. I gave him every chance, but it seems it had to end this way. If I had accepted it like that, I would have sided with my husband, and César, what would he have done, you tell me?"
-Leave, I suppose, and do the same thing he's been doing…

-That's right, and we wouldn't have had at least these years together, even though they've been rubbish.
In this way, César's wake and funeral became a tearful and distinguished event, and the news in the newspapers announced the news in great pomp, lamenting the loss of such a beautiful and sensitive person, because César was a kind of patron to some amateur artists and musicians, and the obituary emphasized the terrible conditions of the slums into which César had had the misfortune to enter for the benefit of his protégés.
The ritual was organized by the Society, of course. But Eva no longer belonged to it. She had been distancing herself since César's illness, and the company suffered as a result. The Larriere family had been one of the founding families, and the reach of their influence had diminished—if not their income, then certainly their wealth and influence. The readjustment to the country's new political landscape would take time, my mother had told me on the phone, worried.
"All of South America…" she told me at the funeral. I had been fortunate enough to receive one of her infrequent visits, which rarely coincided with her mother's schedule (I was certain she would at least come to my funeral, whenever it might be)—"…is devastated, and Europe must protect it from itself. It's like a psychopath in and out of the psychiatric hospitals that these Latin American revolutions have become. There is no cure, only immense patience."
This was her way of saying goodbye once again before heading back to Brazil, making it clear that the extra expenses due to Clarisa's illness were my responsibility, since the work she should have entrusted to me had to be done by someone else. She refused to go inside to see Clarisa, and after a quick, sad glance around my apartment, we took her to Ezeiza in Méndez's car.
"Don't get worked up about it," he told me as we walked back, still with his new habit of putting a hand on my knee. "I'll give you some of the drugs, Lisandro, and you sell them, buddy, and I won't charge you a commission."
-For how long?
-What do I know! With this shitty country, how can you know where you'll end up dead tomorrow? But that's what friends are for, right?
That's how I entered the peddler's shop, a word that made him laugh and prompted another of his affectionate hugs. I don't really know who Oscar

Méndez was, or what he was. Multiple personalities, or rather, countless layers of an onion, were revealing new colors and forms of the same strange personality, as strange as the sinister feeling it gave me. Death, for me, held no mysteries; it was plain and boring like the pampa, arid and unchanging. But in Méndez's eyes, there was always room for the twisted, for finding skeletons of dead birds in that soil where there were no trees, and there lay the mystery, in those cracks of imagined reality he hid, waiting to lurk.

I've been called a bird of ill omen, a jinx, and much worse names, but I'm used to it. There are those who chase after misfortunes and are simply madmen who, through their tenacity, almost always find them; there are others who attract them because something within them feeds them, and they can't avoid them no matter how much they flee and hide, they always catch up with them sooner or later; and finally, there are those who create them, entities more than beings, powers that can take various forms, especially any of the other two categories, because they need a body with which to express themselves, since as mere entities, they are nothing. They say that energy is potential, but potential becomes force thanks to the flesh. The biological is the soul's perpetuity, not its prison. Thanks to it, it expresses itself and procreates. The *soul* is depleted like an unused battery. Sometimes I think that when we stop thinking about God, God dies.
My first client, then, rang the buzzer of the intercom, broken like a deaf trying to make himself understood with bangs and groans. I went out into the hallway, opened the door. He was a young guy, with a cap pulled down to his earlobes and covering his eyebrows, bearded, looking more like a bohemian than a convict.
"Good evening," he said, on that summer night that fell like lead over Buenos Aires.
He had a familiar look, but I couldn't quite place him.
"The freight man sent me"—this was the password we had agreed upon with Méndez. "He told me you have the packages packed." This last part was his invention, and then I realized who he was, but I couldn't believe it. I let him in, unlike if it had been just anyone else, but while he seemed not to recognize me, I had him sit down in the kitchen and offered him some mate. He looked up, and I saw in his eyes that he knew me now.

-Lisander?
-The same, Arturo. I didn't expect to see you here, old man.
He took off his cap; his hair was long and unkempt. His cardigan was too big for him, and his pants were baggy. He was thin, and I realized he was using cocaine, who knows for how long.
He explained that he started taking exams to stay awake. He was doing poorly in college; everything he studied hit him like an explosion.
-I don't know if it's the politics they teach, because you can't call that philosophy, or if I'm the one who's crazy.
-And when did you come here?
-A little over a year ago. I enrolled in Philosophy and Letters, and I'm still there.
He felt a shiver run through him, but in reality he was trembling from withdrawal.
- I need… you know, Lisandro.
"Okay, Arturo. Wait a bit." I went to get the drugs and handed him the little paper envelope. He searched his cardigan pockets for money. And while he waited, I asked:
-How are things in town? Do you have any news?
Didn't you hear?
-About what?
"The anthrax epidemic. It killed all the sheep on the ranch, one by one, over several months, even though my father did everything he could to prevent it." He broke off, nervous and trembling. "May I use the bathroom?"
-Don't be an idiot, I'll help you.
I put the cuff on his arm, prepared the syringe, and gave him the injection. What was I going to do? Leave him to his own devices, watching his clumsiness, or pretend that none of it existed simply because he was going to the bathroom? When he calmed down, his face thawed from the shadow it had been wearing, and now he looked like the poet and writer he longed to be.
"Damn it!" I said. "I didn't know anything, with what happened to my wife... And Mecha?"

"I left when the epidemic started, which didn't seem so serious at first. Later, I found out by phone. She says she's okay, but with all that tragedy..."
-Well, Arturo, but Enzo Sanhueza can...
"It's clear you don't know anything, Lisandro. Mecha's tragedy isn't the sheep, it's her parents. My aunt Martina died; she got a fever and defecated for days and days. And Uncle Enzo was left bedridden, with a stroke."
Yes, I told myself. It was a tragedy worthy of Sophocles in the middle of the humid pampas. I rubbed my head and leaned on the kitchen table.
-And what are they going to do?
"I don't know. The last time I spoke to her, she told me that my old man takes care of her brother, and they're like two lonely old goats. Two country men who look after each other, my old man the disabled one, and the disabled one is my old man's pillar of strength."
-And you?
"And what about me? Do you see me running a ranch in the middle of a collapse? What do I know about all that? I know about fictional cities and conflicting feelings, and what inspires me is frustration, Lisandro. It's my sustenance, besides this," she said, crumpling the small envelope and throwing it on the floor.
Since she was on vacation from university, she stayed at home and left the boarding house she could no longer afford. She helped me care for Clarisa, and I noticed that she found satisfaction in this work, perhaps seeing it as compensation for what she had left behind in the village: the illness and the sudden poverty.
When Méndez saw him at home, he told me:
"Do you bring all your friends, Lisandro? What is it about you, old man, that makes them all seem to appear as if you were a magnet?"
"It will be the land that is in my hands," I replied. I wasn't usually so cryptic, but they both understood me, one because his mind was filled with death, and the newcomer through intuition, a virtue inherent in his soul.

I had already won three clients for Méndez since we met: Clarisa, César, and Arturo.
One day in February, I found Arturo locked in the bathroom. I thought he was injecting himself, so I left him alone. An hour passed. I knocked on the

door; I was about to wet myself. He didn't answer, and I had a bad feeling. I knocked again, and I heard him crying.
-What's wrong with you? Let me through.
Finally, I pushed open the door, which had no key but was held by a knob that, luckily, had loosened with use. I found him on the floor, his wrists slashed and the floor covered in blood. I bandaged his wounds, opened his eyelids; he'd overdosed, I don't know how badly. I put him in the bathtub and shook him to keep him awake. If he dies here, I told myself, if he dies, I repeated, like a chant that was also a prayer to the god of my ancestors, hidden in the Amazon rainforest: extreme vitality enveloping the germ of death, finding in each seed the exact void, the basic nothingness, the absolute absence. The world, a mirage reflected by the water of that bathtub on the walls and ceiling, and returned by the bathroom mirror: reflection against reflection, canceling each other out and evoking the white nothingness, more lethal than darkness.
I left him in the bathtub, thinking he was dead. I called Méndez. Clarisa was calling me too. When he arrived, he told me he would take care of everything. He stitched up his wounds, but first he injected him with naloxone, which few people knew about back then. We emptied the bathtub and refilled it with warm water. Arturo was sleeping naked, and we sat on the edge.
-What happened?
-How should I know, I found him locked up.
The next day, Arturo was awake, wrapped in an old bathrobe, sitting in a kitchen chair. Méndez and I gave him mate, coffee, and some croissants that I went to buy at seven in the morning at the bakery on the corner.
"Don't you want to say why you did it?" I asked him. Méndez was sucking on the lightbulb, making noise, sitting on the counter, listening to us.
-I spoke with Mecha. She married Franco.
I patted my thighs in exhaustion from such stupidity.
"You're an idiot, Arturo. Did you think she was going to wait for you? And on top of everything else, with all the drama she's going through? I'm glad that at least Franco had the decency to marry her and help her. I can just imagine her all alone, poor Mecha."
-And who is this Mecha they're all bragging about? Killing yourself over a skirt, my dear, seems like an old and tasteless joke to me.

Arturo grew bolder. He stood up, his robe undone, revealing his thin, blond-haired body, and especially the needle marks on his arms and stomach. The bandages on his wrists were stained with dried blood.
-And what do you know, are you trying to tell me?
"Calm down," I told him. Méndez raised his hands and ignored me.
When we sat down again, I said:
-Mercedes Sanhueza is the most beautiful girl I've ever seen. She's quite a personality, with her intelligence, her skill at work, and her gentleness when she sits down and listens to a record…
-You fell in love with that girl too. The three of you like dogs in heat around the femme fatale, right?
Arturo stared at him, silently.
Clarisa called me.
When I went to see her, I knew she had heard me, as she heard everything, of course, what was happening in every corner of the apartment. Her ears, heightened by her other physical weaknesses, had become, almost, the conscience of the house. But there was no reproach in the few grimaces she managed to express. The other two stood in the doorway, watching us. I was holding her hand. They came in, momentarily reconciled.
The three of us were gathered around the bed, and the light from the bedside table, always on because her eyes couldn't tolerate daylight, shone directly on us, and it was as if that light came from her, from Clarisa. Like a Renaissance painting, we were three vanquished angels adoring the Virgin. There are unexpected moments that redeem men.

5

In April, Arturo started classes again at the university. He didn't want to work, except for what he did at home: taking care of Clarisa, cooking, and cleaning the bathroom. In exchange, he got a roof over his head, food, and drugs, because I couldn't break him out of his damn habit. One day, he told me that Franco was coming to the capital to try his luck.

"And you invited him to live here, didn't you?" I asked, even though I already knew the answer. But what intrigued me most I kept to myself: the reason for helping the man who had stolen his girlfriend.
Franco Espinoza showed up one night with a bag, work boots, gaiters, a black shirt, a neckerchief, and a beret. He was burly and proud of himself. He had been wandering around since the bus terminal, walking the whole time because he didn't have money for a taxi, and all the buses were making him dizzy .
We embraced after a long time. I introduced him to Méndez, who immediately saw him as a good specimen of an ant for his army of destroyers of good morals, but an ant that wouldn't be overwhelmed by the very thing he carried. Franco's good looks contrasted sharply with Arturo's. They greeted each other with a prolonged embrace, both seeming to be gazing at Mecha in their arms. Not a trace of resentment on the surface, but Arturo's inner turmoil—more of a shapeless mass of angry mobs than a procession—was simmering.
Respectfully, he wanted to greet my wife. He shook her hand, kissed her forehead, manly and attractive with the country look she missed so much. Clarisa murmured something in his ear, he smiled and said:
-They're out there, scattered about.
When we left the room, she told me that she had asked about the brothers. At the dinner we shared, the four of us, she told us about the Sanhueza family's situation.
Enzo is still in bed, except when Macario takes him out in a wheelchair. It's admirable how that man's mind works; he can barely move or even urinate on his own. His brother takes him to the bathroom and sits him on the toilet, waiting with saintly patience, listening to Enzo as he plans to rebuild the ranch, this time with an olive grove. Can you imagine the work that entails? And the knowledge required to ensure a successful harvest? But the man refuses to give up, and Macario is already preparing everything.
"So why did you come here?" Méndez asked him.
"I'm an animal man, I don't know anything about farming. Not even Mercedes trusts her father now. I told her: as soon as I see an opportunity to settle in Buenos Aires, I'll send for you. Whatever happens with the Sanhuezas, the ranch is going to disappear sooner or later."

Arturo looked at him, resentful but feigning compassion, and as soon as he heard Mecha's name, his eyes widened like an owl in the night. What was he after? Did he want her to come to Buenos Aires and restart the cycle of the teenagers who were always together? Now, however, there were two men and a woman; she supposedly belonged to one of them, but in these cases, nothing could be taken for granted.
We remained silent, each side of the square table, where a tablecloth supported bread crumbs, plates with remains of steaks, glasses and bottles of wine, and cigarette butts dead like small twisted larvae.
"And what do you plan to do?" I asked.
Franco shrugged.
-Whatever. I'm tired of not indulging myself.
Méndez laughed.
-Let's drink to that, guys.

We clinked glasses. From the bedroom, Clarisa was laughing; her laughter was weak and broken, but it was loud. We celebrated that too.
Méndez shouted, so she could hear him:
-Cheers, Clarisa, we're all your friends here, damn it. Four men to protect you.
It was true, she united us. And Mecha, a ghost too beautiful, threatened to separate us.
Franco went to shower, Arturo to the small room where he slept, Méndez and I stayed drinking more wine, and then a whiskey I kept under the corner of the kitchen. He lit another cigarette; I told him to slow down, that so much smoke was bad for Clarisa. He got up, opened the window overlooking the patio, and leaned against it with the cigarette between his lips.
"What do you think of the new guy?" he asked.
-Let him convince himself, I know the legacy he carries, and no matter how much he restrains himself, he has a devil inside.
-Like everyone else, Lisandro. You don't tell me anything new, but I'll listen to you for a while.
Just then, Franco appeared, with a towel around his waist, his torso bare, and his hair disheveled and wet. The peasant was strong, with arms made for work and shearing.
"Where do I sleep, Lisandro?" he asked.

-And where will it be? In the little room with Arturo.
"Okay," he said, and walked off dripping water down the little hallway.
"This is already a pension," Méndez joked.
-Yes, and nobody pays anything.
"They'll pay soon, Lisandro," said Méndez, throwing the cigarette butt into the yard and closing the window. "Everyone pays in due time."
He was talking about me, of course, and he wasn't telling me anything new.

Franco spent almost the entire year drifting from job to job. First, it was odd jobs in construction. Then, when he thought he'd landed a permanent position at one of the port's sawmills, he was fired without cause, he said, other than for doing more work in less time than his coworkers and for smoking or leaving early when he'd finished. "Those aren't the customs of the trade," they'd told him when they let him go. Then, by pure chance, a neighbor who looked at him with lustful eyes told him the post office needed mail carriers, and that her brother could get him a job. Franco, then, got brave. It wasn't a job that required strength, but simply stamina and attention to detail: walking a lot and not putting the letters in the wrong mailboxes. They asked him if he had his own vehicle. Since he didn't, the post office would give him a bicycle, but he had to take care of it as if it were his own. "Of course," he said, "no worries, boss," and so on and so forth.
For nearly a month he wandered around the capital and its surroundings. He even slept in the neighbor's bed, as a gesture of gratitude, and when he boasted about it in the kitchen, I saw Arturo's face grow increasingly angry, a rage that had already turned into a tremendous fury. Mecha's name was never mentioned.
But one day he arrived on foot, dejected and cursing. His postman's uniform was disheveled, his regulation cap was missing, and his mailbag was only half full.
"They stole my bicycle," he said.
The next day, they tried to arrest him. Even if it was true that the mail had been stolen and not sold, as they suspected, he still had to pay for it. But that wasn't the worst of it; he'd taken the mail home, and that was considered theft of private property. A huge commotion erupted at the post office when the police arrested him, not because his colleagues defended

him, but quite the opposite. They didn't like this handsome, arrogant guy who acted all high and mighty, who probably spent five minutes at the homes of some lonely woman delivering the letters, and who'd gotten the job through connections. The neighbor's brother had already found out from her—she was jealous and resentful—and he was probably the one who called the police and stood idly by when it came time to intervene on Franco's behalf.

He spent four days in jail. Then, calmly and deliberately, Méndez went to visit him. Holding onto the bars, he asked him:

-So, how are you doing?

-Don't play dumb and get me out of here.

-A few days of abstinence won't hurt you.

But that afternoon they kicked him out. I don't know what Méndez did with his connections, which were numerous, varied, and deeply rooted in the recesses of both official and semi-official institutions. He always found a way around the rules, a way to get ahead of everyone else, without anyone noticing until he'd already gotten what he wanted. Of course, those involved in these shady dealings noticed, because they were the ones who benefited from what he offered: money, drugs, and connections.

When Franco returned home, the four of us sat down at the table. It was time to stop postponing the inevitable.

"Hey, Franco, your integrity is truly commendable, kid. I really admire you..." Méndez's sarcasm wasn't irritating, but even funny; I was even laughing, and I still don't know why.

Arturo ate and looked at Franco with resentment.

-Okay, if you have any work, let me know.

-Come with me tomorrow and help me move. With your strength and back, you won't have any problem.

-And are the furniture pieces very heavy?

The kid from the countryside had already entered the taxonomy with ease. Summer was a hot and lucrative time. Méndez's business seemed to be growing, not because he flaunted his wealth—on the contrary, he kept a low profile. What did he do with the money? Did he invest it? Pay bribes? But what were his immediate goals? Little by little, he wove together his personality, and the result was nothing more than an introductory sketch, a rough draft, but quite plausible. His immediate goals were simple and

unremarkable: paying rent, a late installment, getting a job for an acquaintance, lending money at very low interest rates. But the moving van carried heavier loads and ventured into upscale neighborhoods, as they say. He often mentioned Colonel Ansaldi in his conversations, almost as an aside , and General Gonzaga as well. He talked about politics like any ordinary person, defending workers' rights, protesting against poverty wages and the multinationals that exploited us, and he said, also like any angry father whose salary wasn't enough to make ends meet, that this country needed a firm and uncompromising hand.
"People are only intimidated by a rifle, boys," he harangued us, with the cigarette between his lips, his legs on the table and wearing a t-shirt, because that summer, as I said, was unbearable.
"And what about the laws?" Arturo would ask, sometimes alert enough to remember his idealism and philosophical theories of morality.
Those few who know them, my dear, couldn't care less. Society doesn't run on books, but on flesh and blood. Books get burned or destroyed, but bones remain.
Yes, Méndez was a second-rate philosopher, but a philosopher to the core. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to call him a politician, even though he disagreed and constantly railed against that class. But he had a particular vision of society, where his personal interests didn't carry much weight, but rather a kind of idealistic ambition (and in this he resembled Arturo) that he believed he was putting into practice through his machinations, which disregarded the basic rules of bureaucracy and what was considered acceptable, and he always came out on top. In his informal speeches, I often thought I saw his plan of action for the society he wanted: a kind of immense institution driven by chaos. Chaos, he said, was the architect of his world: the plumber and sewer technician, like the designer of a somber aesthetic, because in the dark you only see what you want to see: the beautiful as well as the terribly deformed, confused as one and the same.

There are events I didn't know for sure, others I learned about when they were told to me. There were conversations I didn't witness, but which I reconstruct based on what happened afterward. For example, the one that took place between Arturo and Franco, one ordinary day, in the small room

they shared, careful to protect their private thoughts from us, the bosses of the house . Méndez practically lived here, and had turned the apartment into almost a barracks. I should be grateful; he'd been paying the rent for some time, thus allowing Clarisa to have a decent life, and that was what mattered, in the end, for all four of us.
"When is Mecha coming?" Arturo must have asked, as if in passing, distracting his attention but not his eyes from the book he had in his hand.
-Until I'm sure I can provide her with her own home, I can't tell her to come.
-But you know how she is, she's not one of those who aspire to a palace.
-You want me to bring her here to live with us so I can have sex with her, don't you?
Arturo threw down the book, stood up, and said:
-I should beat you to a pulp…
Franco must have laughed, of course.
"With those writer's fists? Calm down a bit, we know each other well. You're mad at me because Mecha chose me."
-Because you took her from me. I'm family...
-Of his class, you mean…
-We never treated you differently…
-No, not until we grew up and fell for her. Anyway, it was inevitable, and you don't understand that, buried in your books, as if the world were a novel.
Arturo went back to bed.
"Sometimes it's preferable..." From the drawer he took out the injection equipment.
Franco, who wasn't involved, cursed.
-Books or drugs, it's the same thing, they build you limbos where you can live in peace.
Arturo shrugged.
But the seed had been planted in Franco's unease. He'd told us several times that the money was coming in slowly, and Méndez kept urging him to be patient. Clients' trust was earned over time; otherwise, everything would fall apart. But by the beginning of winter, Franco's patience ran out. Unlike Oscar, he liked things money could buy: going out, taxis, a car, a house, even decent brothels, not that little warehouse Méndez had taken us

to. But what excused all that vanity was the sincerity he showed when talking about Mecha, and his desire to bring her to Buenos Aires and give her a nice house or apartment in a classy neighborhood.
He seemed restless, but he wasn't complaining anymore because he knew the arguments Méndez was going to give him. He dressed well, had gotten a used car for deliveries, and had built up his own clientele through referrals or those Méndez had given him. However, Oscar still handled the merchandise. The bigwigs made contact with those they called supervisors, or trusted people. Méndez had more than proven himself, both in that line of work and in several other things I didn't know about but could imagine. The pistol he sometimes carried under his arm when he came home wasn't just for show, and on many occasions I thought I could smell gunpowder on his clothes. Especially the day he stopped by to say hello to Clarisa, and she, her senses now heightened by heightened sensitivity, said to him in a low voice:
-You smell burnt.
She, poor thing, was saying exactly that, and Oscar looked at me for the first time in a long time as if he didn't underestimate me, as if he even considered me superior to him. I must have felt flattered, I suppose, especially at that moment, when I still didn't know the true depths of Méndez's soul, if anyone ever truly knew them.
Knowing what happened next, it was as if Arturo and Franco had conspired to destroy each other. Since neither could do it alone, whether out of pride or simple cowardice, they seemed to be saying, " *I give you permission to get rid of me,"* through a series of secret or half-hearted actions they carried out separately, but with the deep conviction that the other was aware of them, or at least suspected them.
The thing is, Franco couldn't take it anymore, and he entered into a deal with the Krakovskys. They were a gang of criminals who competed with Méndez for supplies in the neighborhood and almost the entire southern zone. Ezequiel Krakovsky headed one of the family branches, which had interests in various sectors, almost all of them outside the law, so to speak, but they hid behind the facade of legitimate businesses. Whether it was circuses, trucking, a few private finance companies, or supermarkets, people knew them, but they had no choice but to buy whatever they sold, because if not from them, then from someone like them. Méndez worked

alone, or so he said, but in reality, he was the mastermind behind a network of relationships that didn't involve concrete deals with concrete merchandise (because drugs were so volatile that they couldn't be considered as such). It could be said that Méndez's business was men and women, even children. Without them, there was no possibility of him prospering. He worked like an invisible being on the streets, disguised as an ordinary man, half-bearded, half-disheveled, waiting for a bus or the girlfriend with whom he would go to a motel for an hour, or two if he had enough money. He lurked on street corners, scrutinizing people's features until he found their weaknesses, and then he would talk to them, smoothing them over, like a chameleon that changed color depending on the person he was with.

But since he couldn't be everywhere at once, most of the time he had to trust those he'd chosen, and he'd already come to terms with the fact that betrayal was as natural as breathing, and shouldn't be taken personally. Whoever did, bam, a point-blank shot and that was the end of it. He knew he couldn't be one of those in charge, but he was very good at polishing the boots of those above him, so that if they tried to step on him, they'd slip.

Franco started coming home late, after we'd already gone to bed. When Méndez stayed over, he slept in an armchair. I'd hear him come in at two or three in the morning, hours when he knew the kid had no errands to run.

"Was the sex good?" he asked, without getting up.

-The usual...good night.

Sleep well, Franquito. They chose the perfect name for you…

That was one of the last nights before the tragedies. It seems Franco paused before entering the room, glanced at the armchair, but said nothing. What for? Women argue, men reason.

That was how Franco found to make some extra money, and it was more than enough and fast enough because he sent for Mecha to come the first week of July. Did he have any idea what it was like to be unaware of what Méndez was capable of? Obviously not, just like none of us. He told us one Sunday night, when we used to have a barbecue in the little patio, blowing the smoke from the grill towards the neighbors, no matter how much they complained, but they had stopped doing that when the kitten that used to wander around the building disappeared one day. Maybe they would look

curiously at the barbecue the following Sunday; they could think anything about us.

"Mercedes's coming," he said, choripán in hand, enjoying Arturo's blank stare. But that look knew more than it betrayed. How much did he know about the business with the Krakovskys? They must have, it had to be this way, talked about it in hushed tones, in the little room, on the nights when Méndez wasn't there. Of course, they weren't worried about me. They saw me so absorbed in my worries about Clarisa that they thought I was oblivious or indifferent to anything other than the house and my wife, the daily life within the domestic sphere. They must have wondered what bound me to Méndez, besides the drugs to sustain Clarisa, since I could have gotten them elsewhere, and I wondered the same thing myself, but they were attracted to that supposed independence of thought with which Méndez treated me, as an equal and not as just another abject client. We were friends, of course, because nothing less than intimate friendship could be described as the daily exchange of ideas, wine, and food under the same roof, where our glances were devoid of any trace of resentment or self-interest. A manly love, one might say, bound us together. Nothing more than a firm embrace, sharing a cigarette, even sometimes dirty laundry or the bathroom. But the same was true for them, the newcomers. As I said, Clarisa, without moving, moved within our minds, or had taken root there: she was our conscience.

But Mercedes Sanhueza swirled around in our bodies, stirred our hearts, and her memory warmed us to the point of not ignoring that the well-known nocturnal discharges were nothing more than her slow work in the convolutions of our overheated brains.

She would finally come.

Franco had bought a small house in Villa Devoto, a residential neighborhood, with a front yard and a rosebush, a gabled roof with French tiles, a corner store, and a school for the children he planned to have. She, in her apron, would wait for him every night in the middle of the living room with dinner ready. But what kind of movie had the boy been living in? Too much city life had ruined him. What kind of job would he come back from? An office worker? And would she settle for that role, wearing an apron and an old-fashioned hairstyle, like a doll?

Well, Méndez and I told ourselves, dreaming doesn't cost anything. The harsh reality would come, at least when it came to women, because he already knew enough about the other economic reality to bring it all crashing down, like what happened to you, Lisandro, I told myself. Or maybe the kid needed to delude himself like that, since the only drug he consumed was his own dreams of getting ahead, dreams that undoubtedly stemmed from that Espinoza family lineage that had always kept them mired in poverty and marginalization. While others had managed to fight their way out by clinging to others, regardless of who they were, he tried to rise up by grasping at the clouds that the sweat of his own body helped to form as he earned a living. He knew full well that money doesn't grow on trees, but he still thought that what was called love transcended the depravity of any ordinary woman. Mecha's beauty had proclaimed as much throughout her life. She, the unattainable one, the heiress of the estate, who treated him like a friend, almost like a boyfriend, sometimes, was of another class, her skin was lighter, and she had a relative with whom she had been symbolically married since before they were born.

What he wasn't entitled to, he earned when Arturo came to study in Buenos Aires.

"And how did you win Mecha's heart?" I asked him one day, when we went for a walk near the port.

"I have to tell you the truth, Lisandro. I never had a chance. Arturo screwed himself up. The letters he sent her with poems ended up disillusioning her. I even saw contempt in her face when she read the letters or hung up the phone when I called her. Arturo had distanced himself from the drama of the ranch because he'd never had any connection to it. Family blood is just blood, and it doesn't guarantee anything, does it?"

To what extent could he be sure of that, knowing that he came from the Espinoza family?

When Mrs. Martina died and Mr. Enzo fell ill, there was little to do on the ranch. The farmhands had left, the weeds were growing wild, but I couldn't keep up with everything, and one day the machinery broke down and there was no money to repair it. It was around that time that Uncle Macario asked me for help. Mecha's father needed to be fed and cleaned, and I became his valet. That's what Arturo called me when Mecha told him on

the phone what I was doing. He thought it was contemptuous, and that's when I knew she had definitively rejected him, not as a cousin, of course, but as a loving husband. Together, one or the other, sometimes two, occasionally all three of us, we maintained Mr. Enzo as what he had always been: a man of high standing, clean and well-dressed, even though he couldn't get out of bed.
We were thinking of you, Lisandro.
"I'm no saint. Do you know how many times I wanted to kill her?"
-But you didn't. You shouldered the burden, and put on a brave face, as they say.
I shrugged. What was I going to say? The truth was unknown to me, and what I held as certainty increasingly resembled a clown's makeup.

In the following days, Franco was nervous, restless, forgetful, or dropping things. We teased him about Mecha's arrival, but Méndez knew it was something else entirely. He hadn't been able to justify Mercedes's coming without revealing that he had a place to take her, after having used that as an excuse for so many months. And where had he gotten the money? Méndez knew what he earned, and he couldn't pull the wool over his eyes by saying he made so much from the neighborhood clients. He only mentioned once that he had connected him with a businessman who arranged meetings with prostitutes for his associates, about ten men on average, who consumed all sorts of drugs and paid well.
"What's the guy's name? Maybe I know him?" Méndez asked, not expecting sincerity. The answer, so crude, was lost in the air.
The Krakovskys were expecting a shipment, and Franco was in charge of hiding it. That was his job with them, a simple custodian who wasn't trafficking for them yet, but as proof, they would pay him well if the merchandise remained safe and was sold to the right person. The little house in Villa Devoto, then, was a promise resting on matchsticks.
Arturo gradually learned all of this, even deducing that the shipment must already be in Buenos Aires, but he didn't know where. The little information Franco had confided in him didn't include the location. When he asked him, he saw more contempt than distrust on Franco's face. You don't tell an addict where several kilos of cocaine are, of course. It was that contempt that fueled Arturo Sanhueza's anger.

I'm telling you all this because I found out after it happened, piecing together the events with the clues I gathered along the way.
Franco sent Mecha a book for her birthday, June 30th. It was a book of poems by José Asunción Silva, a Colombian poet deeply rooted in Romanticism. We had heard him mention his famous and stubbornly dark *Nocturnes.* What made others laugh or shudder, in me provoked incongruous feelings of annoyance and bitterness. Cemeteries and their atmosphere were etched into my genes and were the very substance of my soul.
But for them, it was simply an excuse to achieve something. For Franco, it was a way to communicate the shipment's location to a Krakovsky messenger: he had underlined in the poem the verses that coded the block, the sector, and the gravestone number under which the shipment was hidden . Mecha would surely find Franco's gift strange, but what did it matter, if she was coming to Buenos Aires with him?
For Arturo, however, literary pleasure became the perfect opportunity to get rid of Franco for good. He saw him searching in the library, that shelf above the bed where Arturo's favorite books were kept. He didn't say anything; Franco was up to something, he was sure. Then he noticed the absence of Asunción Silva's poetry collection, and then the delivery of the gift for Mecha, whose birthday we all knew about.
So it was that on the day she traveled, she sat waiting in Retiro, as they had agreed with Franco. Arturo knew this, but not when or who Krakovsky's messenger was. If they were paying so much for such a simple task as hiding something in a safe place—or at least that's what they promised—Franco would find himself caught between two fires: betrayal of Méndez and Krakovsky.
But when he found her at the station, she was crying on the floor, surrounded by people, shouting that her purse and book had been stolen. A man, a stranger, had sat down to chat, and meanwhile, she had become distracted looking at the verses marked by Franco, and suddenly, the man from the station had run away.
What surprised her so much, Arturo gradually pieced into the puzzle that he and Franco had been assembling separately, unaware of the precise piece the other was placing. But they knew each other so well that I say it was a mutual consent to destruction, who knows why, perhaps for the same

reason that had happened to me: the impossibility of possessing Mecha definitively, because the ideal we had set for ourselves was as fragile as we all knew. To acknowledge it, however, would have been like knowing we were defeated from the start. And then, what was the point of being born and struggling with this poor flesh that rots over a soul that aspires to eternity?

Tired, anxious, and confused, Arturo tried to calm himself so Mecha wouldn't be any more frightened than she already was. They had coffee with milk at a bar near the station. They talked about the verses by Asunción Silva that someone as unfamiliar with such sensibility as Franco had underlined. Remembering the poem he had studied so extensively at university, he knew with certainty the location of the hiding place: the Chacarita Cemetery. He quickly and openly took Mecha out of the bar. They had to hurry if they didn't want Franco killed, because the Krakovskys didn't like double-dealers, but only after they had obtained what they needed.

Wasn't that what he wanted, for Franco to disappear from Mercedes's life? But Arturo had never held a gun, and he didn't know what killing was, and he panicked. It was the withdrawal he was going through, I suppose, that contributed to his being in such a state. Running, sweating, and flailing with every step toward the cemetery, dragging Mecha along, he no longer thought with calculation or coldness, but with desperation. Saving Franco, if possible, was less important than getting the drug. Suddenly, Mecha and the cocaine were one and the same immediate goal.

I thought the man at the station was Krakovsky's messenger .

But the man at the station was me.

6

Méndez had told me, placing his hands on my shoulders, face to face, the cigarette between his lips and his beard unruly, wild as thistle thickets in a wasteland:

-I need you, Lisandro.
He unfastened the armpit pouch with the .32 and strapped it on me like a tailor fitting me with a new suit. I knew how to shoot, of course, out in the countryside, at the animals I hunted for pure fun, and once, when I was very young, along the coast, when my mother was in charge of the Mesopotamian dead. A reminiscent expression, moreover, of other times and other places, because we Goncalves have that in our blood, the capacity for memory, which is the essential capacity of death, not oblivion, as they say.
When it was time to pay, Méndez went to Clarisa's room to give her her afternoon tea.
-Go ahead, I'll take care of her.
I went to Retiro Park and sat on a park bench. I was lost in the memories the Torre de los Ingleses (English Tower) evoked: like the terminal station where the trains the English had paid for by mortgaging our futures arrived and departed, I traveled back to the beginning of the century, then to the 1800s and the famous invasions and the credulous legend of Creole patriotism. Death hovered over Buenos Aires, colonial and muddy like a riverside town, and the putrid, misty river that flowed into a freshwater sea. Latin American incongruities that ignorance has been responsible for confusing, intermingling philosophical terms, twisting feelings, and creating the fatal product of vanity. We are black people seeing ourselves in the murky mirror of a freak show, those mirrors whose magic is solely their ability to undo appearances and unleash the flow of fears and desires, so that they fight in front of the mirror, and the winner will be a monster or an Adonis.
I knew the Krakovskys. I often ran into the brothers, nephews, cousins, uncles, and children, and their wives, who spoke with furrowed brows, fair-skinned, with dark hair, and a Polish accent they couldn't shake. The men were robust and strapping, almost all of them, with dark or brown hair, usually curly, thick beards, and abundant, curly hair on their chests and the backs of their hands. They didn't greet you; they grunted.
I went under the station's eaves as night was falling. I saw Mecha sitting on a bench, her hands in her lap, holding a book. She was wearing a light-colored, outdated dress, her hair was blonde, and she wore a hat of the kind no woman in the city wore anymore. I stood up to smoke, looking for

the messenger. Then I recognized him: Iván Krakovsky. They'd sent the idiot, luckily for me, or so they said. I'd seen him wandering around the neighborhood, looking for victims. He wasn't very tall, broad-shouldered, with long hair tied up like in the old Cossack days. He was going to the bathroom, and I followed him. There was hardly anyone there, just the attendant at the door with the little table for tips on the way out, some guy in the toilets, and him alone at the communal urinal, that wall down which a constant curtain of water ran, dripping onto the floor where he washed himself and carried his urine to the sewers. Standing against the wall, one hand on his hip and the other holding his dick. I stood next to him, pulled out my cock, and took a nice, long piss. I looked at him, he looked at me. I glanced down at what I had in my hand. I shook myself and turned away. I already knew the kid, because that's all he was, a guy over thirty who fucked teenagers with the police's blessing, because the parties he went to, God, left him feeling like he'd just come from a trip to heaven, making stops at the stations of hell.

He knelt in front of me and put it in his mouth. I let him, looking around. One walked past, smiling; another, with his head down. And when no one was around, I pulled out my .32 and blasted him point-blank in the head. Almost silent, point-blank, with the constant flow of water along the wall and that noise of bathrooms, the water and the shit coming and going, reminding us that we could very well be living in a bathroom our whole lives, the world is a toilet, which, ironically, doesn't heal anything.

I left him leaning against the wall, the water dripping onto his perforated skull, cleaning him without waking him, like a drunkard forever escaped to his limbo. I went outside, and there was Mecha, against the backdrop of the tracks and some closed train cars, the ironwork of the station rising towards the roofs like in a cathedral.

I approached, I stood next to him by the bench.

-What are you reading?

He looked at me. I waited for him to recognize me. It was a futile hope, dead before I was born, I knew it, yet there he was, listening like a fetus lodged in my brain.

-Nothing, I don't know. A book of poetry.

Are you waiting for someone? Can I help you?

I sat down beside her. What had been distrust turned into familiarity. I think my love hadn't died if, in her eyes, I continued to offer her that trust, even though she didn't recognize me. Had I changed that much? Or had she simply not paid enough attention to me back in Lavalle to remember me afterward?

At times, as she spoke, I saw her frown, perhaps trying to recall what lay hidden beneath layers of disinterest. I felt let down after several attempts to steer the conversation toward the past, her family, and her home. Her only concern now was the delay of Franco, her husband, she said, who had sent her that book as a gift. How could she look for it if it hadn't arrived? She showed me the letter that had come inside the book; I glanced at it, so as not to arouse her suspicion, because her interest lay in the underlined verses of the *Nocturne* .

And when I read them, or rather, when she recited them aloud to me, I realized. The meeting would be in a cemetery, where the shipment had been hidden. I felt myself falling into an abyss from the high heaven I had ascended to since Mecha had taken possession of my eyes that distant afternoon at the ranch. When I awoke to reality, I was in my usual place, the flat earth I walked on searching for the right spot to dig, the stone or old asphalt paths between the gravestones, or in the single-story houses with withered flowerpots and cement floors. And surrounded by corpses or bundles, like Clarisa.

I felt wounded, a wound always open in the center of my chest, and my brain, always frustrated, bombarding me with speeches and sermons of rebuke and despair, without any possibility of redemption. Above, the sky, impersonal, poisonous, light, futile, and hopeless, because it is only an endless present. Below, the earth, teeming with dead things that are never abandoned, thrown away, or forgotten, bodies with all their flesh that transforms into the scent that spreads the memory of things, and further down and more perpetually, the bones, recalcitrant and hardened to remain as long as possible, beautiful as unborn children and unbearable as flies.

Knowing that he didn't remember me, that he hardly ever would, I felt the weight of the earth rise toward the roofs above the platforms and there it became coated with dampness, forming an immense and fragilely unstable

ceiling. The heaviest things are often the most fragile. And from there, the future dead spoke to me, calling me *Lisandro, Lisandro.*

Then I snatched the book from Mecha, and ran away.

Chacarita Cemetery. The verses don't mention it, obviously, but what other cemetery in the capital could be the meeting place for this buying and selling? Among the dead, everyone knows each other and no one speaks, or perhaps they laugh at the lurid obscenities of the living who barter money and dubious pleasures. How naive the living are, they must think, or what fools. But while we are alive, our flesh floods us, opening the dams it builds in our minds, and the fluids come and go; hormones and blood are the messengers that make up the hydrography of life. The rivers dry up, and the dry riverbed remains as if there had never been anything there.

The streets among the desolate graves at that time of night , late, when normal people have already had dinner and are going to sleep, are a city paralyzed, or barely the surface beneath which flow the memories deposited in the bones.

I walked, remembering the countryside and my spying visits to the Sanhueza ranch—the wealthy, the progressive, the family that, like any family, had its arguments and irreconcilable differences, but which nevertheless remained a family. And the ranch house protected them, the parents and the children. The Sanhueza children: the handsome Arturo, bohemian, a loafer like few others, a dreamer, an idealist for convenience; Mercedes, the soul of the ranch, her beauty, her intelligence, her resignation. The practicality of women amazes me, without understanding it; it is cold and expects no reward, it is simply a way of acting without name or principle.

From a monument made of stone, marble, or whatever it was, I hid to watch them. The Sanhueza cousins were crossing the cemetery as in the old days, hand in hand and in silence. Unlike those times, there was no grass beneath their feet, but cement and asphalt, and above them, instead of the blue sky, the musty darkness of the Buenos Aires sky. And all around them, tombstones and funerary monuments instead of trees. The only dogs that followed them now were the invisible dogs whose barking rose from among the tombstones or from behind the abandoned vaults. There were

some that slept in the looted or recently opened graves, waiting for the next occupants.
They slipped in behind a tall stone angel, a kind of avenging angel with his sword raised high, dominating the scene: that block of the cemetery where the contraband merchandise was hidden, buried and waiting for its resurrection to wreak havoc among men.
Suddenly, a shot rang out. The flash gleamed in the night. There was a fall, the fall of a lifeless body, whose head peeked out as it fell from the side of the angel monument.
Immediately, a scream from Mercedes, her face smeared with tears that glistened faintly in the reflection of the metal that was rapidly approaching, in Franco's hands. He was now beside her, trying to lift her and separate her from her cousin's body. I heard her screams, which Franco tried to silence by covering her mouth. The names Arturo and God escaped Mecha's lips, but he looked around, frightened, searching for the man from the station.
Then, it was all a whisper, more or less interrupted by cries and little screams that were meant to be explanations that Franco gave off the cuff, but Mecha was crying, and yet, now she was hugging him, the man who had killed her cousin.
I approached to observe them, emerging from my hiding place, walking along the deserted street between the graves. I held the book in one hand and the pistol in the other, and in my back pocket, an unlit flashlight.
When I saw them embracing, crying next to Arturo's body, consoling each other, understanding each other, I knew definitively that I did not belong to humanity, that I was something else, another being, entity or species that had come into the world as a messenger and a collector, who carries letters of upcoming unwanted visits, of evictions due to insurmountable mortgages, of medical evictions, of sentences of the law, and who then picks up the waste and takes it to be buried properly.
But this time, the bitter obedience to my substance, so often rejected but finally conquering, found the right accomplice to reconcile me with my destiny.
Seeing them there, embracing, being two and one at the same time, I had the privilege of abandoning my grudges and giving way to hatred, so defiled, so underestimated.

I shot Franco in the back. Another flash illuminated the night of the cemetery, more mournful barking, and Mecha's scream when she saw the flashlight with which I was approaching.
Reciting the verses, the book now abandoned on the ground, illuminating her frightened face, I approached speaking of shadows, and I knew then, from her expression, that she had recognized me, at last.
I threw her on the ground, between the bodies of those two who had loved her, perhaps more truly than I, but not so definitively.
I possessed her right there, and then I killed her.

THE BARKING OF THE NIGHT

1

When they arrested Victo Hugo Molina, I was in a room at the morgue. It was three o'clock on a Sunday afternoon, steeped in boredom, sitting on a stool, leaning against a cold marble autopsy table, its surface stained with a patina of human fat that was impossible to remove. My lab coat was on but unbuttoned, my shirt sweaty and unbuttoned halfway down my chest, and I was in a solitude that wasn't really solitude, because she was there, the woman who had saved me after that collapse into which Alma's death had plunged me, with a sick son who had been in and out of hospitals since he was very young.

Blas was already seven years old, almost eight, thin, weak and pale, and yet alive, like a miracle that he was not willing to acknowledge except for blood transfusions, laboratory tests that formed books of several volumes throughout his life; injections of anything, it no longer mattered nor was I interested in knowing, because after so many years of supervising the doctors who took care of him, I had already given up on keeping track of the doses and the drugs.

In contrast, Soledad, the nurse who had been assisting me as a forensic expert for a few years, now accompanied me professionally, of course, but also as a devoted lover. She, disregarding all feminist demands or protocols, occupied a secondary role in my son's and my lives. She, the ever-present, sometimes exhausted nurse whose place was taken by the lover and surrogate mother, belatedly, submissive, aware of being sidelined but secure in her self-esteem, which prevented her from making arbitrary and confusing displays of character for men like us, my son and I. Because Blas, despite his age, was a man because of his experience of suffering and pain.

When they brought Molina in, his hands behind his back, handcuffed, and head bowed, they sat him on a wooden bench in the office that sometimes served as a waiting room for detainees awaiting the arrival of the prosecutor or the judge on duty. As was the case on weekends, and especially on this long holiday that extended into Monday, July 9th, the

court staff was minimal, and all procedures had to wait until the first business day of the week. He was escorted by two police officers, and the officer in charge greeted me and walked listlessly toward the operating room door where I had peered out after hearing the echo of the ambulance engine in the underground corridors.
-How are you, doctor? On call, as usual?
Officer Zaldívar was driving me crazy with his lewd advances. He'd had his eye on Soledad for a long time, and despite the setbacks she'd caused him, he persisted, resentful and envious.
"What's up?" I asked.
-You'll see, Ibáñez, something you don't see every day.
Then a policeman came in, struggling to carry a body bag on his back. That unorthodox method surprised me, even though I was used to seeing many flexibilities in the protocol established by law. When he dropped the bag to the floor, there was a sound like wood, I think, like water too, but mostly a metallic clang. And then I smelled it, as clear as ever, but this time so intensely nauseating that it seemed to penetrate the fabric.
"What are you doing? Leave it on the table," I said, annoyed, to the policeman, who looked at me with a sweaty face and his hands on his hips.
"What are you carrying, a body or scrap metal?"
Zaldivar laughed.
"A dismembered body, and judging by the smell, it looked like it had been there for several days. It was inside a musical instrument case. We went to the detainee's boarding house, searched everything, and found the instrument in question."
-Isn't that the job of another expert?
-There are also pieces of the body in the instrument, doctor. Not everything fit in the case the detainee was carrying, or maybe it did, but there is blood in the instrument, and some fingers and other things, doctor, you'll see.
He greeted me with a bow, smiling, conspiratorial, yet determined to avoid all that strange carnage. And I looked at the detainee in question, sitting against the back of the hard chair, surprised by his appearance: he was a very attractive man, I think too handsome to be a man. Yet his beard grew blond and slightly curly, his eyes suddenly met mine with a bluish hue like two turquoises. Yes, they were neither blue nor green, but both at the same time, while still remaining either green or blue. Timeless eyes, I thought to

myself, in the middle of a face with a white complexion devoid of any blush, beneath a broad forehead above which grew hair full of small, well-formed curls. But the humidity of that July day was taking its toll on him as well, and I noticed his white shirt with sweaty armpits and his trousers, part of a suit whose jacket had been left somewhere, clinging to his legs because it was thick, made of a winter fabric.

Soledad began to open the bag. Zaldívar had already left, and I had closed the door. The smell began to waft out, and we tightened our masks. Blood came out that hadn't yet clotted due to the pus that had fermented in the damp and oppressive weather of that week. We pulled out shapeless pieces of a body—we assumed from one—and then the wooden case Zaldívar had told me about, shaped like a bell. At the bottom of the bag was the tuba, its chrome-plated metal surface almost untouched by the body's fluids.

All Sunday afternoon we spent piecing together the puzzle. The bones were shattered, as if crushed by a hammer, others bearing the marks of axe blows. The flesh and muscles were so damaged that they were almost a mass that crumbled when we tried to examine them with the scalpel or forceps. Hands, feet, and forearms were broken in two or three pieces, as were the femurs and arms, and the torso was cut into wedges that had retained their shape despite the ravages of the weather. The entire body of a woman had been dismembered to fit inside the tuba case.

When we finished assembling what was left of the body on the table, it was ten o'clock at night. There had been several phone calls from the prosecutor's office.

"Why the rush?" I asked, holding the tube with a glove stained with rot; I too, sometimes, threw protocol to the wind.

It turned out the detainee was a musician in the Colón orchestra, and that night he was supposed to play at the gala performance for the president. But the performance and everything else had been canceled following the discovery. I wondered what the murderer was doing with the body in the case, already half-rotted, going to the theater. Was his intention to dismember it on stage? No, I told myself, too spectacular for a criminal mind like the one that had carried out such meticulous dismemberment. It was, without a doubt, a work of art: a kind of modern art sculpture, created by a methodical mind to the slow rhythm of the tuba's sound, deep,

austere, sometimes tearful like that of a priest lamenting the death of Christ in a *De Profundis psalm* .

Soledad listened as I rambled, and she must have thought I was connecting all this to my Catholic beliefs, deeply ingrained in my very soul, beliefs I had tried to eradicate my entire life, without success. Alma's death had been a massacre that had only exacerbated the dissonant tolling of bells that… then I realized that the echoes of my thoughts swirled like the folds of a tuba, expanding within the great bell of this blood-stained instrument, which I had nevertheless almost slipped onto, leaving it clean of all traces except for what its owner had chosen to harbor within, in the dark well from which the sound emerged, as if he wanted to muffle it, or perhaps make the woman's severed fingers touch, feel, and imitate the music born from the recesses of his mind, the mind of the man who had murdered her. In that way, perhaps, he wanted to make himself understood, if there was anything to understand, and even forgive .

And when our task was already finished, the handwritten report was signed and sealed at half past twelve at night so that the court clerk could type it up when the courts opened, and the photographs were taken of each loose piece of that baffling puzzle that seemed to defy all intelligence because it invited different figures to be formed, as if the murdered woman had not been one, but multiple in the same body, and the man had wanted to kill them all together at once.

And what had he achieved?

Countless pieces that multiplied the number he had tried to abolish.

I peeked into the kitchenette where Soledad was dozing off after her night nurse's vigil, and rudely shook her shoulder - I was in a very bad mood and was taking it out on her - but she didn't flinch, she was too tired.

"Go home," I told him.

She grabbed my purse and kissed me on the lips.

-I'll call you tomorrow.

That was our code, well-worn, commonplace beyond belief, but for us it meant something else: Blas and his illness. He had taken on the responsibility of another woman's son, and he bore it with dignity and quiet resolve.

From the kitchen doorway, I heard the engine of Soledad's Fiat 128 going up the building's ramp to Junín Street, and then heading down the street.

And then I heard the music coming from the radio speakers we used to accompany our work, and I met the gaze of the detainee in the waiting room: his head against the wall, his lips moving to the music.
I put my coffee cup down on the table and walked over to him. An off-duty police officer was watching him.
"When are they taking him?" I asked.
-Who knows, doctor, with the long weekend, the procedures take longer.
The man who was looking at us, his hands now cuffed in front of him, after humming, said:
"My mother hated this version." The voice, although raspy, had a very subtle and repressed hint of effeminacy.
"Don't bother the doctor," the officer challenged him.
"It doesn't matter..." I said to the guy: "What do you mean?"
"What I was listening to in the operating room, doctor. Mozart and *Eine kleine nachmusik* in Stokowski's version. My mother hated that misinterpreter of the classics. For her, they were untouchable."
Strange, I told myself, of course that man was strange. Capable of dismembering a woman.

(Were the remains found actually those of a woman? The only positive indication was the absence of male genitalia; the rest were fragments in which it was impossible to distinguish anything certain. There was the possibility of sending samples to the laboratory, but all that would take time. Even the fingerprints on the bell of the tuba were in such a state of putrefaction that it hindered any result.)

He could also distinguish the different versions of a musical classic. An amateur, perhaps, but certainly the master of the tuba.
"Would you like a coffee?" I asked him.
The officer looked at me, curious, and shrugged. The three of us went to the kitchen; he handcuffed one of my hands to a table leg and stood in the doorway. While I heated the coffee maker, I said to him:
-Go ahead, officer, the gentleman isn't going to get away from me.
-It's my duty, doctor.
-I relieve you of that duty, and I showed him the revolver I kept in the drawer of that same wooden table, which also served as a desk for filling out reports, storing forms and stamps, and any other junk that was lying around.

He left us alone. I sat down opposite the man, who stared at me expressionlessly. His blond beard wasn't thick, but sparse, and his face was too beautiful, neither delicate nor coarse, simply pristine like a Greek sculpture.

-Are you the owner of the tuba?

-Yes, doctor, although I suppose not anymore, and not at the beginning either. It was from the time I took it from my father until a few hours ago. Who was that strange man?

-Are you conducting an official interrogation?

"None of that." I poured him coffee, and with his free hand he took the cup. His fingers were delicate and long, perfect for reaching the valves that harmonized the sounds created by the force of the player's lungs. He didn't have a robust chest, but of course that wasn't necessary to play a wind instrument properly.

-And who was your father?

Wilfredo Molina, from Uruguay. He played the tuba and sometimes the English horn, even the trumpet on occasion, for twenty years in the Colón's resident orchestra. Whenever someone in the wind section was absent, they'd call him. He married my mother when he was twenty-five. She's a pianist, Dr. Aurora Beltrame, her name is. Haven't you heard of her, you, a lover of good music?

-No, not really, excuse me…

"It's nothing, her time has passed, and that was one of the reasons for… well… her temperament. Those were very few years of fame that *promised so much to her ambitions* … you laugh, of course, because of the tango, but what can you do? That's how we musicians are; every melody alludes to countless others. Did you know she was the first Argentine pianist to record Beethoven's complete sonatas for a national label? She was very young then, not yet nineteen when she finished the entire cycle, around 1949 or 1950. She gained a lot of prestige and recognition, but like everything in this country related to high culture, such a marathon achievement went unnoticed. She could have gone to Paris, but she was already pregnant, and she had to stay in Buenos Aires. My father, she said, was an anchor. The permanent position at the Colón was something he, in his mediocrity as a musician attached to the unions, wasn't willing to give up." But she was something else entirely; she soared when she played the

piano, and sometimes I thought I saw crows fly out of the black keys, circling the apartment we never had the chance to move because we couldn't afford it. My mother's famous recording was never reissued, of course, and the rights either expired or were ignored in the ever-efficient labyrinth of bureaucracy.

The kitchen light flickered sometimes, when the generator that powered the refrigerators where the bodies were kept would suddenly switch on.

-So you inherited your father's instrument.

"No, doctor. My father washed his hands of the family's debts. He slept with the orchestra's violist, a young widow who boasted to my mother about having been the wife of a composer who had committed suicide shortly before that time. She was a show-off, and she made a point of surrounding herself with all that melodrama, believing it would secure her fortune. What did she do with my old man? She took him to London as an assistant. She never saw any talent in him, of course, except for the advantage of having an attractive and virile man, because that's what he was, a womanizer who stopped when he found the woman who knew how to control him. My mother, despite her self-centered, narcissistic, and despotic nature, and precisely because of all this, only managed to make him find ways to slip away. And then…"

He stopped, staring into the void ahead, perhaps at my face.

-So you left the tuba at home?

He woke up from his reverie.

My sister and I were children, but our destinies were already set. Musicians, of course. She, a pianist, a path my mother would personally oversee. As for me, who knows, because I was the eldest, by barely a year, and the reason she had to abandon her career abroad. The guilt, subtle and never spoken aloud, existed tacitly in every gesture between us for as long as I can remember. She didn't much care what I did, as long as I didn't embarrass her. So she relegated my musical education to my father, but as I already told you, it didn't last long. He taught me to play the tuba, because I had strong shoulders, and I did breathing exercises to hold my breath and exhale forcefully, because that's the secret to sustained notes and achieving harmony in long, flowing passages . Baroque composers are incredibly difficult, and the only time I ever received enthusiastic applause

from my mother, when I was thirteen and debuted with a Pergolesi concerto, was the one and only time. That night they fought, more than usual, but my ego shattered when I learned that my father wasn't fighting to defend me, but over his mistress, Alina. I locked myself in the room with my sister, who listened to the shouting and covered her ears in vain. Then there was a door slamming. My father had abandoned us. Mom, whimpering, playing the virtuous and dignified victim, came into the room, knelt before us like a saintly and self-sacrificing mother, and told us through crocodile tears that from that day forward we would be on our own.

It was a little after two in the morning. Neither of us was sleepy, really. Molina seemed eager to tell his story, because he wasn't in front of someone who would judge him, and I found myself immersed in a story that took me away from my bitterness. What had drawn me to the murderer—the memory of Alma's massacre, to intimidate him, to revel in his obvious guilt, since I'd never had anyone to blame for Blas's mother's death—suddenly returned with the siren of an ambulance arriving a few blocks away, at the Hospital de Clínicas, to save someone who most likely couldn't be saved.
-It seems he didn't have much affection for his mother, Molina. Is that why he killed her?
He looked at me with those wide-open, indecipherable, medium-colored eyes.
"You don't know anything, doctor. What kind of report did you write, if I may ask?"
-He killed a woman, Molina.
"And that's why you think it was my mother? Those lawyers will look for her and see that she's still alive and kicking in our apartment, banging on the old piano in her old room, but no less lucid in her malice."
"So whose body is it then? We'll find out in due time, but I'm very curious to know what goes through the mind of a man like you."
"Someone was killed, Doctor, don't deny it, and you're blaming me. Of course, a murderer is just like any other murderer in the end; the one who takes one body can take many others, and the sum doesn't change the result. Debts can only be paid with one life."

I sat down, taking off the dirty smock that still smelled of decay. I was so used to it that I already ate at home with that smell, which Blas had also grown accustomed to. My son and I lived in a kind of perpetual morgue dedicated to the memory of his mother.

-She was killed by dogs. I mean my wife.

-I know them, doctor. I mean the dogs.

"Sarcastic, on top of having the hiccups of a whore," I thought.

"Don't explain, I already understand. They tore her to pieces. It was in La Plata, wasn't it? My father told us about it one day when he returned from a benefit concert at the theater. The streets were closed, he said, and you could hear the barking in the middle of the night. He was already with Alina, both of them in the car, the Peugeot, with the windows closed, sitting still, waiting for the police barricades to open, the ones trying to contain the dogs. The police sirens were wailing, their wailing punctuating the barking, endless, exhausting, infuriating. The time he told me all this, one day when he was giving me lessons outside the house, in an office at the Colón Theater that he used as his own after so many years, I was finishing a long *fugue* that he ended with a coda of my own invention. The result was regrettable, but it served to remind him of the howl of those dogs that had been etched in his memory." She told me—and even without naming her, I knew who she was, because I was almost a man by now and I hoped she would understand—that she began to cry, and she saw the vulnerability she had tried to hide with the subterfuges of a self-serving and deceitful woman. If Alina, even in her art, knew how to deceive, this time fear betrayed her. The music of the dogs and their barking, my old man said that day, was like the ancestral sound of the wind through the monstrous trees of a forest of tragedy; you could smell the blood in the city and the asphalt that sprouted from the earth enclosed beneath the streets, the enslaved and humiliated earth, the souls of the dead who had finally found their voice.

I kept my mouth shut to avoid hitting him, I tied my tongue with long, dead phrases buried between my teeth. That a murderer with the aspirations of an anatomist and craftsman, handcuffed to the kitchen table of the morgue, with a forensic expert as his confessor not of guilt but of family grudges, and a policeman asleep at the door, on a long weekend where the absence of justice was even less important than the absence—the indifference,

really—of the law, should utter the name of my son's mother, exasperated me like few things ever have in my life.
"I need to go to the bathroom," he said.
"Officer!" I called, shouting.
He appeared with a yawn and a face full of erased dreams.
He untied the handcuffs, and we accompanied him to the bathroom. The policeman stayed by the door; Molina went in but walked past the urinals and into a stall. I heard the stream of urine from the shameful murderer. He reappeared, buttoning his pants as if he'd pulled them down instead of unzipping them. Habits, I thought, that perhaps had something to do with that authoritarian and possessive mother I'd been talking about.
Back in the kitchen, I told him:
-Aren't you sleepy? Just go to sleep.
He shrugged.
-God grants me one more day, doctor, tomorrow is a holiday.
"They're not going to hang him or burn him alive, Molina. They'll just lock him up for life. He's still young; he has a long and fruitful life ahead of him of doing nothing but spending the taxes of good citizens."
My mockery stemmed from the memory of the night of the dogs in La Plata. Molina's father had been just a few meters away from me that night. What if I had met him, if we had spoken? But each person is their own sole witness. Like him, locked in his car like a turtle in its shell, listening and observing until the danger has passed, I too was an isolated cell running after the dogs, when it was already too late to stop them, kill them, and tear them apart.
What Molina had done to that woman (if that was indeed what she was, because doubt was growing and uncertainty was taking hold of my understanding) I would have done to the dogs. And what if it had been a man who killed Alma? Just a few steps away, in the autopsy room, scalpels, hammers and chisels, saws and forceps were being used to dismember Molina's body in search of the reasons for his life, just as I was searching for the reasons for his death. That man's life was a mystery I was striving to decipher, like a sleepwalker in the dead of night, confusing black with white, and truth with lies.

2

"You're a Beethovenian animal, aren't you, Doctor? I recognize it in your troubled, furrowed brow. Passion concentrated and transformed into anger."

Seated once more at the kitchen table of the old morgue building, antique and elegant, a symbol of a bygone era of nobility never recovered. The cracked marble countertops, the cabinets with dishes none of us used anymore, old, shattered porcelain that evoked either respect or insidious mockery, the large kitchen as if at any moment one of the doctors, prosecutors, or defendants might decide to put someone inside. Cremation to get rid of the troublesome bodies, bundles of flesh and bone that do nothing but rub our resentment at still being alive in our faces. The memory of the flesh holds everything, but those memories also suffer the process of putrefaction, and that is how they mix and ferment into a sour, acrid substance whose smell is the command of the field marshal of the armies of green flies.

"That's right, Molina. Mozart was a boy who only matured in his later years, but he evolved towards sadness and a certain mystical resignation, which is why he accompanies me in the autopsy room. But Beethoven was always a resentful and bitter old man; his moments of apparent sweetness are brief and mostly melancholic. There is no joy in him; only his fury justifies it."

Molina laughed heartily, and the heavy kitchen table rattled with the clatter of his handcuffs. He had taken off his slippers, and the smell of sweat was faint but old. His wet shirt was unbuttoned to the second button, and he had almost no chest hair.

"You're a special case, Doctor. Many music critics wouldn't be able to express what you just said so accurately. But my old lady knew it, because that's how she was, just as you say: a caged beast gnawing at its insides until it can't take it anymore and becomes a fury from which anything can be expected."

-It's four in the morning, don't you want to sleep?

He straightened his back, leaned on the table as best he could, his wrists already injured, and stretched out his hands a little to touch mine.
-Do I look tired to you?
-I don't know. I am, but I can't sleep…
-Me neither. There are nights, doctor, when the barking is so loud that it seeps through the walls and transforms into incessant echoes between the bones of the skull.
I looked into his eyes, those immense seas that flooded the South American night of Buenos Aires that long weekend, a time when political independence, cultural independence, emotional independence were being celebrated. And we were left alone, without culture, without family, and without laws. Building a toy country with materials more fragile than plastic. The holiday was a long recess where governmental roles were settled: the executive in his uniformed office and the judiciary in its recalcitrant opium- and morphine-fueled laziness.
I poured him another cup of coffee. The policeman was asleep sitting in the waiting room armchair, without his cap, without shoes, his belt loose and his hands behind his neck, dreaming, perhaps, in a baby's crib or in a whore's bed.
Molina said:
-What if you loosen the handcuffs a little, doctor?
She spoke to me like a woman, softly and insinuatingly. I thought about the revolver, and that if she tried to escape, I had the opportunity to avenge, in a practically unknown person, and several years later, what gnawed at my soul (*the soul of my soul*), and above all, my son's illness, a consequence of that death, perhaps, or perhaps not, but who knows what the combinations of chemistry are, I, a doctor of the dead, who with each corpse I examine knows less about human nature, because I never found the soul in those bodies, I never dissected it nor opened it to interrogate it. And anyway, using the gun wasn't in my plans that night, because when I got up to look for the handcuff key the policeman had in his shirt pocket, I did it because of Molina's gentle tone and the look he gave me. A sense of complicity formed between us.

The key was right there, within easy reach thanks to the neglect and official stupidity that made it accessible to any Tom, Dick, or Harry, whether doctor or murderer. He didn't wake up or make a fuss, and if he

did notice, he probably thought: the devil take the doctor. After all, I was becoming a nuisance to the system, constantly criticizing and protesting; I was about to disappear any day now.
Molina rubbed his injured wrists, but he didn't smile at me, he only thanked me.
My mother was left alone with us. My sister and I were already teenagers. After a time when she seemed to suffer like a Magdalene, she regained her composure and began to exert her authority over us. Even as children, we knew who was in charge at home. My father went to the theater almost all day, every day. She, however, stayed home giving piano lessons and grading assignments for a high school she hated attending. From morning till night, we heard her complaints; if they weren't about my father, they were about work, money, or household chores. She would pound the piano with a sonata or a minuet, turning it into a focal point of anger and sorrow, and when the piano fell silent, her voice would be reborn. And that's how pain became a music of incessantly frustrated and guilt-ridden chords.
There was the matter of our musical education, of course. Maxine, my sister, was destined for the piano, and my mother took charge of her with increasing zeal. Since she didn't have time during the day, I made her study at night, but she let me practice my tuba or whatever I wanted without demanding too much of me. However, her indifference was a reproach reinforced by contempt, and I felt compelled to seek her approval, which, being mere indifference, would never come.
When Maxine was fourteen, Mom left school and began giving private lessons at home. Her students saw her as different—demanding yet serious—and the old legend of her recordings of Beethoven sonatas had given her a reputation that her character didn't belie. When she closed the door behind them, she would send my sister to sit at the piano and start practicing. Maxine went through different stages that I witnessed without being able to help her: submission, guilt, anger, rebellion. And by the time she turned fifteen, after a whole year of making her practice twelve hours a day—yes, doctor, twelve hours, he'd make her get up at six-thirty and by seven she'd be at the piano until noon, then she'd start again at one until seven in the evening, with tea, cookies, a cup of milk or hot chocolate as a reward, which didn't appear if she hit the wrong key, if the harmony or chord wasn't right, if she stopped to cry, or simply because her fingers hurt

—by the time the rebellion came, I was saying, my sister stopped playing, one Saturday afternoon when she'd perhaps been expecting to celebrate her birthday and had invited one or two friends from school. I was in my room, but I heard the piano lid slam and the shouts that followed. I went out to see what was happening, and I found them arguing, until my mother shut up, because she wasn't one to swear or repeat things more than twice. She simply grabbed Maxine's right hand, which she yielded through tears, perhaps thinking that Mom was finally giving in and would caress her or even kiss her. My mother's face was a mask of makeup she kept at home as if she were in the theater, in front of an audience listening to her art. She, however, held Maxine's hand tightly, pressed down, fingertips pointing upward, and with a wooden ruler began to strike them, again and again, fifteen times, once for each year of work it had cost her, and continued to cost her. That's what my mother said: that she was useless, lazy, that she didn't try hard enough, that she was throwing away so much dedication and talent. That was the only positive thing I heard her say, but a rose withers easily in so much ice.

That night the lesson ended, because Maxine's fingers were swollen and she refrained from screaming for fear of my mother. The rebellion was over. The bell never rang, the so-called friends didn't come to the birthday party of the recluse, the shy, the odd one out. We hugged in the shared room where we slept, she on a bed against a wall, me on another under the window that faced the street. I lay down on her bed, putting an ice pack on it that I had secretly retrieved from the refrigerator in the kitchen while Mom was on the phone with my father, perhaps because of the way she spoke. I would have liked to talk to him; I even stopped behind her, holding out my hand, but my father's character was deeply ingrained in me: avoiding the inevitable was like banging your head against a wall, so silence was my strategy against my mother's weapons, those hands that played Beethoven as if they were an army in perpetual war.

Thus Aurora Beltrame's de facto government was consolidated. For two years there were almost no signs of rebellion from any of us. Maxine's lessons continued at the same pace: a five-hour session in the morning, an hour and a half break, and then an uninterrupted session until seven in the evening, with only the afternoon snack that grew cold on the small table next to the piano, or on top of the piano itself. Once, in her haste to finish a

particularly difficult exercise, Maxine had placed her cup improperly, and it fell onto the keys. Mama, sitting on the same long stool as Maxine, jumped up in horror. My sister's hands were sticky with the milky tea, which luckily was almost cold by now. My mother called her clumsy and stupid, but wouldn't even look at her. She ran to get a cloth to dry the piano, but the liquid had already seeped between the keys. There was no way to tune it. She called the technician, an old man who had known Mama since her days of fleeting fame. He calmed her down, told her not to despair, that after all, it wasn't a very good piano, and I saw utter shame on Mama's face. If I had wanted to break her grip at that moment, I could have easily done so, but she raised her defenses once more, and with dignified silence, let the old man work. A whole afternoon wasted on lessons, which served to give Maxine a rest for her fingers, but that night he made her pick up the theory books and repeat the lessons while we ate dinner. It was a different kind of evening, because despite the silly inconvenience of the tea with milk, she had received a call from our cousin Bautista. He was a journalist, the son of Mama's brother, from whom she had been estranged for a long time. He was coming over the weekend for an interview. He had heard that there were plans to reissue the famous recording of Beethoven's sonatas.

On Saturday she seemed nervous, but she controlled herself as she had in her prime when she gave recitals and concerts, but Maxine was suffering from the same nerves now. Mom dressed her, told her she was getting ready to play something if her cousin asked her to. We would accompany her throughout the interview, for the photos, of course, the happy family photos she would take for the newspaper's cultural supplement. "The famous pianist Aurora Beltrame returns to the stage," she said, her eyes fixed on a poster that never existed, making a gesture with her hands as if caressing the advertisement in the air as if it were a marquee.

We waited all afternoon, the doorbell and the telephone ringing, the three of us sitting, and she occasionally playing something mournful, Schumann, perhaps, or no, something by Erik Satie, because of the slow wait. The cousin didn't come. He called late, making excuses. He didn't promise to come another day; perhaps he already knew that the reissue project had been buried forever. On Sunday, Mother forced Maxine to attend her weekly lessons, and she was especially insidious.

Of course, my sister no longer went to school. The routine Mom had arranged included basic culture classes, piano theory and practice—routine, but almost obscene in its constant, exhausting nature. It was the same chords and passages over and over again, where Mom found fault. *Wrong, wrong, wrong… what am I going to do with you, stupid girl, you don't understand, like this, like this…* And Mom would play to demonstrate, and yes, she was perfect, absolutely perfect. Then Maxine would repeat the fragment, interrupted, fragmented, applying the theory of musical cells that Mom had taught her, where each fragment, however small, added up; each moment was different, a small, independent, and unfinished piece, but with its own *tempo.*

At the end of the day, the criticism would arrive. She would interrogate her about what she had done wrong, and if Maxine remained speechless, unable to answer, Mom would resort to the ruler, and then my sister would blurt out whatever came to mind while thinking about the afternoon class, accusing herself of various blunders, and she was always right. That was what my mother was after: merciless self-criticism in pursuit of perfection. Her method, the method of force, transformed Maxine's fingers into claws capable of recreating the renowned Music of the Spheres by the time she was seventeen.

But one day, Maxine and I were alone because Mom was at school, and suddenly, while I was practicing, she covered her ears with her hands and started yelling at me to stop making that unbearable noise. I was a failure, a military band musician, I was just like Dad, a moron, a nobody, a clown fit to play brass instruments in the circus. That night Maxine had a breakdown. They took her by ambulance to Ramos Mejía Hospital, medicated her, and sedated her until she was like a zombie. Later, they transferred her to Muñiz Hospital, where she was in therapy for six months.

When she returned home, after not having touched the piano all that time, she sat down on the stool without my mother asking her to. My mother was afraid, but when she saw her play as if she had just practiced *Moonlight Sonata yesterday,* she applauded her for the first time. There was no sentimentality, even though the piece suggested it, simply recognition. The routine began again, as harsh as before, but less conflictive. Maxine took her medication before and after practicing, and sometimes between

lessons as well. When she was preparing a difficult piece for a recital that Mom was trying to arrange for her among her former colleagues at the conservatory or the theater, my sister would sit at the piano, drugged, of course, but the drugs only dulled her rebellious spirit, her anger, her fury, her frustration—in other words, the little animal locked in a dark cage that transformed into a monster at night, when she went to sleep. Maxine had nightmares, screamed in her sleep, and woke up crying. I would lie down with her to comfort her, and she would fall back asleep in my arms. For a long time, all of this was so routine that Mom didn't even wake up to the screams anymore, because the next morning she would see her daughter so calm and composed, and above all, playing the piano with such mastery, that that was enough for her, the only thing that really mattered.

But the medication was taking its toll. She would sometimes vomit in the morning and lost her appetite. At night she couldn't sleep, mostly because of anxiety and fear of nightmares, and she said the only thing that stopped them was doubling her benzodiazepine dose. For a while it worked, and even though I told her to go for her checkups, she said she didn't have time, that I shouldn't be stupid as always—didn't she see I was busy all day? She didn't mention Mom, nor did she blame her.

"And what do you dream about?" I asked her one night, at three in the morning, hugging her after one of her bad dreams, with her head on my chest and one of her hands tapping on my belly, as if she wanted to draw the sound out of my body as she knew how to rescue the soul from the piano.

"In it," he answered, without looking at me, without saying anything else. I already knew, of course, but I needed to hear that confidence that confirmed the union of our souls, the homogeneity, perhaps, of our essence. Lying there, we were one, like twins born in different times, one hurried, the other lazy.

From then on, our relationship was different, and it developed into a complicity that shielded us from Mom and her nagging. She at the piano and I in my reading chair, we exchanged intelligent glances that Mom didn't see, or if she did catch them, she told us to stop acting like idiots. Like my father, I was considered the untrustworthy fool, but I finished high school and got a job at the theater. The Philharmonic's wind section had never been well-staffed; the men frequently suffered from respiratory

illnesses, and women were usually plentiful playing woodwinds. The tuba wasn't very heavy, but it was too big and cumbersome, and above all, boring for many. I understood my father's seemingly convenient situation, which had provoked so much contempt from my mother. It was he who, in reality, got me the job. I had started talking to him secretly, from the conservatory or a friend's house, in London. He would call me, of course, and cover the cost of the call. The theater owed him favors, he said, but I didn't believe him. Everything suggested that Alina pulled the strings from London to Buenos Aires; the widow of a composer sponsored by the military had her influence. But I let my old man think that I believed he had done the job; his voice comforted me, it was serene, it was emotionally simple.

When Mom went to the theater, Maxine and I stayed home alone. She used to love listening to me play the tuba, and now it was a new pleasure for her, lost in thought in the armchair where Dad sat, or preparing something in the kitchen for us to share. "The sound of the wind in the trees," she said one of those nights, but then corrected herself, saying it was the sound of the wind in a narrow street between two tall buildings. Yes, it was the music of the streets, and suddenly, she fell silent. She was in the kitchen, but I could hear her voice above the languid lament I was playing.

"It's like a dog barking," he finally said, appearing with a dish towel in his hands. "Thank you for the compliment," I replied. "But it wasn't a criticism," he hastened to clarify, "a compliment. Imitating the wail of dogs isn't easy; it's penetrating the realm of instinct, of weeping and fury. They say dogs are messengers, that they carry men's souls to their deaths. The barking you hear at night, Doctor, in the street, and you don't know where it comes from, is men dying, perhaps accompanied by dogs."

Ambulances wailed, two or three in a row, along Córdoba Avenue. Dawn was breaking, and the ravages of Sunday night and the eve of another holiday were sending their victims to the hospitals: accident victims, gunshot victims, stabbed victims. They wouldn't call me, since my shift had ended at midnight. The relief crew hadn't arrived yet, and my colleague wouldn't come unless he was called in urgently. The kitchen light was beginning to dim. I yawned; sleep was catching up with me.

"Go home, doctor," Molina told me. "Don't forget to handcuff me again before you go."
He mocked me, hoping for complicity and a change of heart on my part. He didn't know me at all, or perhaps he knew me better than I thought.
"No, Molina, keep telling us. I might write something about your story; it's very interesting, with a psychological complexity worthy of an article in a medical journal."
At that hour everything sounded sarcastic, but Molina didn't look tired. His face, now pale from the fading light of the electric day as morning crept through the windows, seemed to be shedding its makeup—that makeup of irony, of artificial gestures that made up his face.
-I imagine that whole cocktail of drugs took its toll on Maxine…

She put up with it much longer than I expected. Mom noticed, but as long as my sister continued with her studies, she was satisfied. She didn't let her guard down, but she no longer needed to crack her knuckles. I forgot to mention an anecdote I just remembered. Maxine was seventeen, thin, but very pretty, with a very aristocratic look, like those models who are fashionable in haute couture magazines. Blonde bangs, iridescent eyes, (*That's the word that's been going around in my head since I saw Molina for the first time)*
hands with long fingers, small breasts that allowed her to wear men's shirts or those suits that Bardot had made fashionable in the movies.

(Molina's blond beard, sparse, on that beautiful face)
A guy showed interest in her. A big man, over forty, named Aníbal, a tough guy, a real neighborhood type, but with money. It was said, and Maxine had told me, that he was in the auto parts business. He'd come from La Plata some time before, but had businesses all over the province. Aníbal Costa had curly hair, a square face, and was clean-shaven, except for his thick black mustache. He was muscular and broad-shouldered. He was, or had been, a mechanic; his hands showed it. The time I saw them together in a bar on the corner near the Córdoba Conservatory, close to Pueyrredón, I sat at a nearby table to spy on them. I admit it, I felt jealous, but what worried me most was that they might take advantage of my sister. The combination of the two wasn't unusual: an older man, well-off and still attractive, and the beautiful, talented, and promising young woman. Each got from the other what they needed: sex and protection. If that had been

all it was, I would have stepped aside, but I wondered how long the guy's whim would last, because I had no doubt that Maxine, besides all that, was looking for freedom. She would have talked to him about our mother on those nights at the bar, they might have made plans. But one Saturday the doorbell rang, and Maxine jumped in fright on her piano stool. I'd seen her nervous since morning; she'd slept badly, so badly that she refused to take her pills and even refused to let me lie down on her bed to cuddle her like we always did. Mom opened the door; there was Aníbal, in a light suit that made him look younger, a kind of attractive Italian gigolo, his hat in his hand.

"Madam, it's an honor to meet you, Maxine..." and the whole introduction that had been prepared, which came across as sincere and natural in his baritone voice, worn out in the workshops by the futile attempts to be heard over the engines. The noise of cars was something Mama couldn't stand, keeping the windows closed all day long, because they invaded the musical space and surrounded the piano, trying to drown it out, and above all, they polluted her ears. Costa's hands betrayed his profession, even though he no longer practiced it, and Mama made a face of disgust when she was forced to return the outstretched handshake. She already knew something; perhaps the neighbors had told her. Aníbal came in, sat down in a chair next to the piano, from where Maxine looked at him as if she didn't know him. Mama told me to prepare something for the gentleman; I looked in the kitchen for cookies and made coffee. "Thank you," he said, patting my face and winking conspiratorially. "And what do you do for a living?" Mama asked him. "To the mechanic, ma'am." He started talking about his family. "We're all merchants back in La Plata. My brother, may he rest in peace, owned a general store, and I worked my way up with cars, until I made a living, ma'am." "And he's married?" she asked. "Aníbal, a widower, with a sick, grown son." He took a photograph from his suit pocket and showed it to us. The photo was passed around, and Mom jumped in fright. Maxine had already seen it, and I stared at the sick boy, his hands twisted like a bird's claws, his body so bent that his face was almost hidden on his chest. I could easily have mistaken him for a crow perched on the ground. When she left, the drama began again. Mom's screams, usually restrained, were this time loud and sharp, and realizing she was turning into a pathetic old woman, she fell silent and let Maxine unleash her moans, whimpers,

and the brief gestures of rebellion she tried to make from time to time. I wanted to intervene, but they both told me, "Don't get involved." She grabbed my sister's hands, those hands she so desperately wanted to protect, those treasures that conjured entire worlds from the piano, and grabbed the ruler. This time Maxine rebelled more firmly, clenching her hands into fists, and I feared she was going to hit Mom. But my mother had tricks she pulled out of thin air, like a magician's sleeve; she always had a word or a gesture to get what she wanted, however insidious or cruel it might be. Holding Maxine's fists, she whipped her knuckles with the wooden ruler. Many times, for several minutes, and I saw the blood. Maxine burst into the room, unable to contain her rage, hitting me and staining my clothes with blood. I bandaged her with pieces of my sheet, hugged her tightly until she cried more quietly. I undressed her and carried her to bed. I gave her two, three pills, and stayed with her, stroking her hair until she fell asleep. I peeked out the bedroom door; in the piano room, my mother was still staring at the keyboard, ruler in hand, still trembling. Her face was etched with pain, and she was as angry as my sister. They were two birds of prey competing, but there was no common ground to fight over. They fought like blind women, guided by the sounds of war. The piano was a kind of tank upon which they both sat, a fortress in the middle of a deserted and desolate battlefield.

That same night, when I fell asleep, Maxine left the house, wearing only the clothes on her back, not even a purse or wallet. I saw her empty bed and looked for her in the apartment. I ran into Mom in the kitchen. "Mom, she's gone, can you believe it?" I said, more scared than worried, but the worry came later, when she said she wouldn't file a report. "Shame," she said, "must be hidden." I ran out into the street and searched for her in vain. One day I found her in the same bar near the conservatory. They were both there, and he was passing her the little paper packets of cocaine. I covered my face, standing on the opposite corner, so they wouldn't recognize me. They were living together, those who knew us told me, one piece of gossip after another. The news reached me because I didn't want to talk to her. "Shame," I kept repeating to myself, while she stayed in the apartment Costa had rented for her. He dressed well, I was told, but he spent all day in bed and at night he went out with Aníbal, both of them high enough to have fun but also to stay afloat and hide it.

There was nothing to be done; Maxine was lost to us. Mom didn't want her name spoken in the house. One day she came into my room, paused in the doorway but didn't look at me, went over to Maxine's empty bed, and pulled back the sheets she hadn't touched since the night she left. She smelled them, and then she looked at me. The smell of the cigarette I smoked, the smell of semen, too. She slapped me as hard as she could, and I stayed still, without answering, without raising a hand.

"The whore," he said, and closed the door.

For two years we heard nothing from my sister. One day a policeman arrived and told us that Maxine was in jail for drug possession and prostitution. Mom and I, standing at the door, couldn't think of anything to ask, so I said, "And Costa?" The policeman looked at me intently, frowning. "We're looking for him," he replied, "it's not the first time he's slipped through our fingers." "They let him go," I said, emboldened by anger, knowing now that all the rumors the Krakovskys had told me were true. Costa ran several brothels in the capital and the provinces. I had gone out looking for her in Mataderos and Barracas for a long time, in the brothels that were advertised in the newspaper or that I would find walking around at night, one prostitute one day, another the next, looking for my sister, without finding her. I also got high from time to time, lying in the street at three in the morning, listening to the taxis like old carts on the cobblestones, and the sirens of the old ships.

And at home, I would sit and compose music for the tuba, and somber pieces emerged where the sound of the wind resembled the sirens announcing fear and catastrophe: ambulances and police cars, and also the melancholic sound of goodbyes. Suddenly, I would put down my pencil on the staff when I heard the sound of the piano from the living room. My mother was playing Beethoven's Farewell Piano *Concerto* —pure coincidence, I told myself—and I began to miss Maxine's tantrums when I tried to play that piece.

I visited her at the police station. She was a different person. Somewhat overweight, with dyed, badly cut hair, a mocking smirk on her face, outlandish clothes, and uncontrollable trembling hands. After spending my savings and taking out loans, I paid the lawyer and took her to a boarding house. There was only one bed. I took off her prostitute clothes and put her in a white nightgown. I laid her down with me, like in the old days, and she

fell asleep. She asked me for drugs, begged me, threatened to kill me and herself, even to kill my mother, "you, who love her so much," she'd say, reproaching me. It went on for months, Dr. Ibáñez, you know about these things. She wouldn't eat, she started drinking wine and then quit, she ran away to the streets looking for clients, groping poor guys who came out of a bank at noon. I saved her from jail a few times, just a few. When he left, he would drag her back to the boarding house and start all over again. Five years, Ibáñez. When I went to the theater to play, I tied her to the bed and gagged her so she wouldn't scream and we wouldn't get kicked out of that boarding house again, like they had from the others. And that was the only method that worked. Abstinence would either kill her or she would eventually survive. When I couldn't stop her screams and wails, I drowned them out with the sound of my tuba. Can you believe it? It sounds like something out of a novel or a B-movie. And one day she finally fell silent and listened to me play. She looked out the window at the dark street, and when I stopped, the dogs barked, as if calling her. She wanted to go, made a move to get up, put on her shoes, and go out as she was, almost naked. I no longer had the strength to stop her; if I had, if it hadn't been that day that the gods, perhaps, or the infamous night dogs had designated for redemption or punishment, I wouldn't have moved from the bed where, barely in my underwear and barefoot, I rescued the music of the suburban night trying to translate it, distinguish between the souls of the dogs and transcribe in the air the decalogue of death.
He didn't leave. Instead, he came closer, knelt before me, and began to caress me with his tongue. I would be his whore as long as I didn't belong to the others.

It was already fully dawn, but the city wasn't quite awake. The cleaning crew wouldn't arrive until eight or nine in the morning. Soledad called around the same time, after she'd tried contacting me on my landline and realized I'd spent the night in the morgue.
"Do you realize what you're saying to me, Molina? You traded one vice for another."
-But that's how I got her to be with me…
-I understand now, Molina, I understand now.

I put the handcuffs on him. He looked at me, and said, pleading with me, now tired and with dark circles under his eyes:
-Will you accept one more trade? Another coffee and a croissant, even if it's old and abandoned in the fridge, for the sake of the story.
"I already know the ending, Molina. It's there," I said, pointing to the autopsy room. "Playing the piano of his own bones."
He burst out laughing, the big son of a bitch.
"Why did he kill her, Molina? I'll buy you a dozen pastries for that information."
Smiling, he said:
We moved to a place where nobody knew us, but that guy started meddling, prying, asking questions, trying to befriend me. Maxine was coming and going because she was trying to make a life for herself, and I let her think that, but she ate and slept with me. She was so sweet sometimes, but the drugs, you know, messed her up, turned her into someone else. Now she resembled my mother in her bitterness and violence, but of course her manners were different. The hatred, the same. I loved her and she hated me, and yet I was the only constant, the only thing that stopped her from throwing herself under a train. One day last week we got into a fistfight. It wasn't the first time, but it was the only time she ended up completely exhausted from overcoming the strength of my hands, which aren't much, but enough to hold the tuba in perfect balance, allowing the sound of the winds that come from the wide river and pass over the streets of the port, of La Boca, of the Riachuelo, to pass through, becoming the chorus of dogs, the wordless chorus, raw, dark, and exiled. Her hands, injured, no longer had the strength even to press a single key on the piano.
I'm going to tell Mom, your dear mommy, what you've been doing to me since we were kids. I'll tell her, I swear, I'll tell her everything…
And I was afraid of her, because I didn't want to face my mother, I didn't want her to see in me my father, the traitor, the pervert who had abandoned her for a younger woman, the degenerate, the useless one, the nobody, the man who had gotten her pregnant and stolen her future success. I, who was nothing to my mother, when she found out for sure, would be everything: the weapon that had destroyed Maxine, her heir, her legacy, the talented hands of the future.

Her life. Mom's life depended on me.
As long as the balance of hidden lies and half-truths was maintained, the quality of the dream and the structure of the fallacy would keep the triangle in its rightful place, a geometric figure of different proportions, but with three lines and three vertices.
If I let Maxine go, Mom would die, and she was the base of the triangle, the longest and best-drawn line. Without her, my sister and I had no reason to exist. The music Mom had never played because of us was as loud as the chorus of dogs in the night.
And so I did. I destroyed the weakest line, the most fragile one, the one that had been fading for a long time. I transformed her body into countless notes on a musical staff. If you were able to read the staff you've drawn on the autopsy table, Doctor, you would find the answer to your question, but above all, you would find clues to many other things far more interesting than the Molina family.
-Like what, for example?
The coffee was getting warm, the bakery bills were missing.
Listen as they approach along the avenue. Do you hear them, Doctor? Lower the asynchronous volume of your astonishment, and listen to Beethoven's unknown symphony.

3

I went outside. The morning sun hit my face, and I rubbed my eyes. For half a minute, I walked along the sidewalk toward the plaza in front of the university, seeing everything yellow as if I were wearing colored glasses. But there weren't many people around at that hour, except for the tanks approaching from Córdoba Street. They were heading in the opposite direction from Plaza de Mayo, where the parade was to take place, but who knew what route they were taking. They were probably keeping watch. The crime, so close to the theater's gala performance, had set off alarm bells. In the poorer neighborhoods, and even in the more affluent areas—because

I'd already heard on the radio that arrests were being made in the streets and surrounding buildings near Congress—leftist groups might come out to protest, taking advantage of the anonymity among the crowds that would take to the streets at midday to watch the military parade.

But that didn't really worry me. I was thinking about Blas. My son had been transferred to the Clínicas, Soledad told me that morning, very early. I felt calmer; it was right there, just a couple of blocks away, and I knew the doctors. I walked there, crossing the plaza and then going up the stairs. The elevators weren't working. I greeted my colleagues on duty, the residents working the holiday, while drinking mate.

On the fifth floor was Blas, in a room far too large for him alone, and in a bed also too big for his thin frame. No one was with him, not even the floor nurse, perhaps the only one there to care for so many patients that day. He looked out the window and could hear a little of the street noise. Up there, strangely enough, the rumble of the tanks was louder, drowning out the music playing on the radio on the bedside table. Blas, like any boy who lives with an illness whose cause he doesn't know for sure, suffered from more or less lengthy episodes of daydreaming and introspection, which undoubtedly allowed him to bear the pain without anger. He didn't seem to know that word, and his usual states were a varied series of degrees of the same contemplation, in which he was absent even with his eyes open, not interested in what surrounded him, but in the projection of his own thoughts outward. What monsters or what angels did he see in us? How much did he understand of what I explained to him about what was happening? When I was able to talk to him about his mother's death years before, I realized that he was absorbed in the state he was in now, and the illness was like a stigma: the mark of the dogs that had killed his mother.

A piano sonata was being broadcast on Radio Nacional. I couldn't help but think of Molina, and while I was chatting about trivial things with Blas, the announcer introduced the piece and its performer. I fell silent, speechless. It was Beethoven's *Farewell Sonata* , performed by Aurora Beltrame. Then, after the commercial break, a military march began to play, the first of many. Where could they have gotten that recording, so difficult to find, according to what Molina had told me ? It was the Radio Nacional archives, after all; it wasn't unusual for it to be stored away until someone found it, perhaps to compile a list of Argentine works or performers for that holiday.

Pure coincidence, I told myself, and smiled, telling Blas all this, because he, despite his age, enjoyed classical music, and I often spoke to him, much to Soledad's chagrin, about the cases I was working on. If he understood me completely, I didn't care too much; it was enough to see the interest and emotion he showed, the questions he asked me, almost always more intelligent than those sometimes asked by my colleagues.

When I finished telling him, I sat on the bed, straightening his sheet, combing his hair with a wet comb to tame its unruly tresses, and glancing, every now and then, at the IV bag and the blood bag connected to the veins in his arms, now purple, now violet. Blas showed enthusiasm, as much as his weakness allowed, but even so, he was like a normal boy.

(God, I'm like the others, dividing the world with the fictitious parameter of normality),

or like a healthy boy.

(*And again, trying to correct myself, I fall from hole to hole, deeper and deeper, into the pettiness of mediocrity, the mediocracy where what was considered acceptable had to be classified, determined, and ordered by decrees that designed reality so that nothing deviated from the usual, the normal, the correct)*

I turned off the radio, but it was as if I hadn't, because from the street rose the sounds of the military bands beginning their strident clamor of cymbals and timpani, and I could barely hear what Blas told me:

-Call the radio station, Dad. And ask.

What for, I told myself. But I was right, curiosity, as throughout the conversation with Molina, had been my only path, valid as any other if it served to understand and distinguish the handrails to hold onto in this old and fragile collective that is our country.

I called Radio Nacional, the number they always advertised for requesting pieces or sending greetings and messages. There were no delays or pointless waiting. A young woman with a pleasant voice, clearly an announcer, told me that the recording in question— *yes, of course, sir, as you rightly say, it's almost impossible to find* —wasn't available to them either, and it had been a donation from Miss Larriere, General Gonzaga's sister-in-law. The young woman, already elderly and quite deaf, had been one of the sponsors and promoters of that most commendable project that the exceptional pianist Aurora Beltrame had managed to bring to fruition,

thanks, of course, to the efforts of the record label, financially supported at that time by the Larriere family, for example, and the whole gang (*that was my mental translation*) of the military. I was prudently reminded that General Perón and Eva Perón had sponsored the gala where the pianist had performed one of the recorded sonatas. Which one? *The farewells* , of course, were a kind of premonition that the general either didn't understand or chose not to interpret. He would soon succumb to his own people, but history later proved that all to be true.

I was only thinking about the chain of events unfolding along my path, within that narrow radius of Buenos Aires. The faculties of Medicine, Dentistry, and Pharmacy, the Hospital de Clínicas, the Forensic Morgue, and so close by, the Faculty of Economics. A whole circuit where men and women were trained to govern a country, because being a doctor, and an accountant, of course, is nothing less than that. The life of the body and the life of the economy, and almost at the center, the hospital, to cure, or attempt to cure, the ailments arising from both disciplines, because science is nothing more than the expression of the soul, an idiosyncrasy constructed by the mind. The structure of a country can be a temple or a military barracks. Silence or clamor.

Out there, the noise screamed obscenities hidden beneath the invisible masks of the agitated mob. Soon the shots would ring out, and luckily, Soledad had already arrived at the hospital. The three of us, sheltered in that room, were protected from the reality of the street. We laughed, we trembled, and she closed the curtain, leaving us almost in darkness, until Blas fell asleep for his afternoon nap.

"I have to go," I whispered to Soledad, who was resting her head on my chest, both of us pressed together in the armchair next to the bed.

- More work?

"Something like that"—I couldn't lie to him completely, but neither could I tell a truth I didn't even understand myself. Is it morally justifiable to feel pity for a murderer, especially for that kind of murderer? The question, which my methodical mind posed with the intention of a poet before a nonexistent audience, or rather one teeming with Mateos who held differing opinions, began to dissolve as I descended the stairs to the hospital lobby and stepped out onto the street, this time onto Paraguay

Street, because the avenue was a sea of people crammed onto the sidewalks, cheering for the squads and platoons of the various forces.
What I felt was apprehension for Molina, as if he were there, locked in the morgue kitchen, protected only by a sleepy policeman… but was it him who needed protecting, or the others from him? What strange paths had my reason strayed down that night I listened to his story?
I found him with his head on the table, arms crossed. He woke up when he saw me.
"How is the boy?" he asked me.
The guard had left and Zaldívar had returned, who said to him:
-And what's it to you?
Don't get upset, Zaldívar, it's my fault for trusting him. Did you eat?
He shook his head.
-Do you want something?
"Damn it, Doctor," Zaldívar protested. "So now we have to order a menu from Tortoni, or would the gentleman prefer a pizza from El Inmortal?"
-Good idea, officer…
"You know what I'm going to bring you? Those rotten eggs you had at the boarding house, that's what I'm going to bring you, you son of a bitch..."
The laughter they had provoked in me was suddenly thwarted by an idea that swept everything away in my consciousness.
"Which eggs?" I asked, noticing that Molina had also fallen silent and was lowering his head.
-Some fried eggs, I think, that were burnt in the pan; the smell was still there when we went in to raid the boarding house.
I grabbed my head in sheer helplessness. Molina had burned the victim's testicles.
-Go get that, Zaldívar, right now!
-But doctor…
-Tell the judge that I'm sending him, that it's forensic evidence.
"But doctor, where am I going to find the judge at this hour, on a holiday? The courts don't open for another few hours..."
-You son of a bitch, Zaldívar! Don't you know what a court order is?
"But doctor, I can't leave you alone with the prisoner. I have no one to replace me; the one who was supposed to come had to go with the

reinforcements at the Congress building. There's gunfire, doctor. Things are getting bad."
We heard the gunshots. And the shouts—we couldn't tell if they were cheers or cries of alarm. It was already five in the afternoon, and the sun was beginning to slowly set behind the Clínicas Hospital. The shadows of the adjacent buildings grew long and began to assault the fragile structure of the law in which we felt besieged. Even Zaldívar was afraid, so much so that he risked his already less-than-stellar record by refusing to obey me. Then I locked the kitchen door. Zaldívar looked at me suspiciously, and then fearfully, when I said:
-You will be our prosecution witness. Show me your weapon.
He did so, opening the chamber and the ammunition. In turn, I showed him the service pistol I had taken from the drawer before leaving, now tucked into my belt. I emptied the cartridges, making sure Zaldívar watched what I was doing.
"You'll be the only one who can stop Molina if he tries anything. No one's watching us; you'll be the judge's only eye, Zaldívar. Do you understand, my friend?"
He felt important, took a deep breath, and nodded.
"Now, Molina," I said, without sitting down, from the other side of the table, already five or six meters away. "Pull down your pants."

Zaldívar clicked his tongue in fright. Molina looked at me with the most desolate expression I had ever seen, comparable only to Blas's look that afternoon. Was I aware of what was going through my head, comparing my son to a murderer? It was the gunshots and the shouts of the civil war outside, just a few meters away, in the street and in the plaza, that revealed those thoughts to me; it was the dead who fell as a result of the Independence Day celebrations.
"Take your pants off," I repeated. "Now!"

He started screaming. He grabbed his hair as if he wanted to tear it out, and he dug his nails into his face until he scratched it. The table had tipped over when he raised the arm that was handcuffed to him. And his screams weren't in the voice we had been hearing, but high-pitched like a woman having a nervous breakdown.

Zaldívar grabbed him from behind, trying to restrain his arms and make him sit down, but Molina kicked and snapped at him. I opened one of the kitchen cupboards and took out the box with ampoules and syringes; there was everything in that kitchen for emergencies like this one, unexpected and absurd.
I injected him with a sedative, and little by little he calmed down, his strength giving way as he sat on the floor, his back against the overturned table, drenched in sweat, his face scratched by his own barely-there fingernails. He was breathing heavily, his gaze impassive and expressionless, his pupils dilated. I felt a pang of apprehension, fearing he would die right there. He had gone more than a day without whatever it was he was using, but he hadn't shown any signs of anxiety or nervousness. His pants were now wet with urine.
Zaldívar looked at me questioningly, without saying anything, without letting go completely even though he had calmed down.
I checked his pulse; it was returning to normal. He opened his eyes and looked at us, agitated, like a boy among strangers. I ran a hand through his hair, just stroking it. He didn't want to get up but asked them to remove the handcuffs. Zaldívar did so and remained seated on the floor by the door, watching us, listening to us.
"Molina, tell me everything. Let it all out, Molina. Your mother isn't here to listen or judge you. She's not going to hit you, Molina. You're among friends. I'm your friend, Molina. Look, let me tell you something. This afternoon, when I went to see Blas, I thought of you. You know how things are? The same fear and despair, and surrounding my son was Beethoven's music, which sounded like a protective shield, you understand? Delicate and thin like a butterfly's wing, but impenetrable to the dissonance and the din of the military bands playing in the street. It was the recording of Aurora, for the first time in a long time, the best thing she did, and then..."

Then the atrocity invaded the house. We were children, Doctor, how could we prevent its invasion? It arrived disguised in the clothes of duty. Everything else was a clown's and acrobat's disguise. But forces storm in with everything they need and seize the very thing they fight against, and disguise themselves in the very thing they despise.
-That's Molina for you, and many see in that the strength of weakness to survive. They gnaw at the power that won.

"But then there are no winners, doctor. Look at me, you've already seen what I am."
-I know who he is, which is not the same thing.
He covered his face with one hand and with the other tried to cover his crotch with his wet pants. The smell of urine made us feel like we were in a hospital room, a hospice, perhaps, or a men's restroom after a long weekend.
When Mom realized Maxine wasn't what she'd expected, when she knew, after many attempts, that she didn't have the talent to be her heir, that she didn't have even a quarter of the talent needed to persist, it was almost at the same time that Dad abandoned us. Maybe he knew what she was thinking, I don't know, and he ran away before the disaster. I can't blame him, in the end. He was like Maxine, not like Víctor, a weakness, a nobody, someone who watched events unfold without daring or knowing how to intervene. Then Víctor, by chance, started playing the piano one night. Mom heard him, and I saw for the first time the ecstasy in her eyes, like when she herself played. She'd never had that expression when listening to Maxine. She let a few weeks, or several months, pass, waiting to see if there was any truth to it or if it was all one of those charades they call stages of growth, phases where a boy tests different facets of his personality, sometimes so distant in appearance. But Victor played the classics as if he'd never needed to learn anything, as if he'd heard Beethoven's cycle of sonatas in his mother's womb, even before he was conceived. My mother exuded music from her very core; perfection flowed through her cells. And all that energy she hadn't been able to release because of my father, who had impregnated her, because of Victor—the product of that conception had fermented like sour milk, breeding monsters inside her. She couldn't prevent it from slowly seeping out of her body for years, like incontinence in a senile old man. But she was lucid and saw that music, which gushed forth like abortions from her body, as a disgrace, and it had to be channeled, cleansed of its debris, and disciplined. I don't know when the idea first came to her, but when my father left, there was no stopping her. She took Víctor as her disciple, relegating Maxine to the secondary role of a filler musician. She was left with her tuba and her mediocre talent. But Víctor needed discipline, his talent channeled, and his fingers began to suffer all that I already told you about: the hours and days

of endless practice, and the blows with the ruler at any hour. Until Víctor cried like a sissy, and that's when I heard her say to him: " *You're like your father, a lazy good-for-nothing, a good-for-nothing . You can't be my legacy. I don't understand how you have that talent in that body and that stupid man's head* ." And she went on like that almost all night, talking to herself, protesting in her bed. We listened from our room, huddled together, unable to sleep.

The next day, very early, I got up to go to school. Víctor wasn't there; she was giving him basic lessons at home, at the expense of her long hours at the piano. But I didn't see him, and it seemed strange to me that he had left. On the stool, sitting in front of the keyboard and playing slowly and carefully, was a little girl. I didn't recognize any of the private students, who, in any case, only came in the afternoon.

When I went over to say goodbye to Mom, afraid as always of interrupting her, I saw Victor's face. He was dressed in little girl's clothes, and I realized it was one of my dresses he was wearing. I was so scared when I saw Mom's expression that I ran away. I knew she wouldn't say anything because I didn't understand any of it yet.

In the afternoon, I didn't hear them practicing. They had gone out, and when they returned, she was carrying two bags of women's clothing from Víctor's workshop. I never saw my dress again. She came into the room, threw everything in the closet onto the floor, and rearranged the contents of each of our closets. As Víctor got used to his new clothes, I adapted too. Because that was the only way to keep Mom from getting angry with us, the only way she seemed satisfied, and sometimes she even smiled at us and said we were her only comfort.

Then, for years, it was like that: the clothes, the household habits, the way they styled their hair and went to the bathroom. Víctor already had long hair, and Maxine had to cut hers as a result. She also changed schools and felt more comfortable with the boys than with the girls. Then came Víctor's breakdown, and when he left the hospital, he was a different person. He looked in the mirror and put on makeup, changed his clothes, and practiced poses at the piano. When the drug problem started, with Krakovsky as their supplier, I tried to stop it, but they beat me badly and called me a monster. There was no going back, I understood, because that way everything fit within the confines of domestic tranquility. Several times I thought about

running away, but the laziness or apathy that Mom attributed to me, as she had done with my father, made me afraid and indecisive, until I gave up. Then Aníbal Costa appeared, and Víctor ran away with him. Did Costa know the truth? It was obvious. For his own use, or to exploit him, Víctor lived for a time as a kept woman, until he had to repay what he'd received. The Krakovskys gave him drugs—hormones, I suppose—to improve his appearance. And what was Maxine going to do but try the same? Because she couldn't leave him alone, nor disrupt the complementary symbiosis she'd always had with her brother, when they'd lie in the same bed, embraced, giving each other warmth before facing the bitter cold of the piano room.

Molina stopped, with his knees bent and his arms resting on them, smoking a cigarette that Zaldívar offered him.

-So he killed his brother…

"Please don't repeat that, I beg you, doctor..."

The anguish of that plea distressed me, but it wasn't cruelty on my part, at least I thought, but rather trying to explain the truth to her, which was the same as giving her comfort.

-You didn't kill your brother because you were afraid of what your mother would think, or that people would find out what she had done to you. None of that.

He fixed his desolate gaze on my eyes and grabbed me with those hands, useless for the piano but expert in death. Outside, the tumult had vanished, but a few sirens lingered, like the languid howls of wounded dogs.

-You saved him, Maxine, because you loved him too much.

THE SICILIANS

1

The Libertella twins were the sons and grandsons of Sicilians who had come to Argentina in their early twenties. At least, that's what they told me when I met them as children in the Villa Luro neighborhood, where I used to sneak out with them after school in Liniers. Without telling my parents, who didn't know their family at the time, I would spend the afternoon there under the pretext of doing homework, having a snack, and then playing soccer in the vacant lot next to their house, by the Sarmiento railway tracks.

I can't remember how many times the ball rolled over to the other side of the railway, and the subsequent challenge of retrieving it across the tracks, but that was an essential part of the game and those afternoons. The trains were slow, of course, and not very frequent, but that didn't matter; the danger was ever-present and amounted to a greater test of courage than crossing Rivadavia Avenue, which, however, was actually more dangerous than the noisy locomotive pulling its cars.

For our parents, it was a different story, especially for the twins' parents, who, because of their proximity, had seen many people die under the passing train, including a son who was never mentioned, born and died before Álvaro and Germán were born. A boy who, as they told me in hushed tones during afternoon tea, while their mother prepared hot chocolate and took cookies out of the oven, was three years old when he got lost in the tall grass and, finding his way out, found himself on the tracks as the train passed. The parents were very young when that happened, their first child dead, and then the mourning, and the woman's gaunt face, which she could never recover from, despite having given birth to a double consolation for that loss, because I could still see the wrinkles of sadness and the imploring plea for forgiveness with which she looked at her husband. The reward, however double, does not equal the cost of what was lost, and from then on, the twins were not so much a blessing as a responsibility, almost a punishment for their previous neglect as parents. The duty was now twofold, and the guilt, if tragedy were to occur again in any form, would also be doubled.

The mother, who wasn't Italian but from Formosa, and who had met her husband in Buenos Aires when she was working as a maid after coming from the province and he was working at the port loading bales, liked to sit and watch us have our afternoon snack, telling stories about that time. The children looked at her with bored eyes, punctuating their mother's long soliloquies with mocking smiles that I couldn't encourage if I wanted to keep those afternoons, in which I found solace and freedom, a secret. But that will come later.

She told us that she had met Leopoldo Libertella, the Italian, one Sunday afternoon, her only day off during the work week, while out for a walk with a friend in La Boca. The Italian was on the sidewalk outside a bar with a friend, who was also off that day. From their table, they watched them walk

by, catcalled them, and instead of being offended, because the catcall had been anything but subtle, they laughed, slowed their pace, and turned their heads to look at them. The men said something to them in thick Italian, cigarettes dangling from their lips, their half-full glasses on the wobbly table. Leopoldo stood up and stepped on the dog lying next to him, which ran off yelping, provoking laughter from everyone and breaking the ice—already quite melted by then—that good manners still imposed in that neighborhood and among those working people who restrained themselves all week to let themselves go on Sundays down more risqué and interesting paths.

He studied to be an electrician and gas fitter at night, sometimes, when he wasn't exhausted from his work at the port. She studied dressmaking. "And look at how things turn out," she liked to say, like a catchphrase she felt comfortable with, where perhaps she found the reason for things and the events of her life, almost with the same satisfaction as someone who finds the essence of human existence, to that afternoon audience of kids who listened, or pretended to listen, while they drank milk from their well-worn cups and chewed on the crunchy cookies she baked when I stayed over, which was almost every afternoon. "Look at how things turn out," then, was the hinge that announced the turn her life had taken when she met the Italian. They got married, and one day he started sitting and watching her sew after she finished the housework, because they didn't have children yet and they had more time for themselves. She watched him, observing her, without saying a word, smiling because she thought the Italian was a pig, thinking about the bed that awaited them in that house—the same one where she was telling us all this, the corner building, already old by then, on the alley between the train tracks and the avenue. It turned out the Italian had no brains for electronics; "too complicated," he'd say when he got tangled up with the connections, causing more than a few short circuits that led to arguments and even a fistfight. And as for gas, forget about it. That's why he couldn't quit his job as a dockworker, and even that wasn't enough to support his wife, already pregnant with the boy who would die three years later, and who would be named Germán, like the other one, who was next to me, listening to his mother.

The Italian, the boys' father, quit his night classes, and now that he came home early, with his shoulders and back exhausted, he would lie on

his bed, with his hands behind his neck, looking at his wife, with her belly grown, sewing until late at night.
"How much do they pay you?" he asked once, as if in passing, with a hint of disinterest and a yawn in the making.
She shrugged.
"Whatever they give," he said. "Those who can afford more, pay less, but what can you do? If I demand it, they don't pay me anything and they kick me out onto the street."
The provincial tone, although very slight, did not help to get good clients in the wealthier neighborhoods; she knew it and resigned herself to it.
-Today I was offered a job at a mattress store, but I told them I couldn't...
He watched her, sitting there in the old rocking chair, a needle in one hand and an old dress in the other. She didn't even have an electric machine to sew faster; he hadn't been able to buy her one, he reproached himself, and it was as if she were saying it herself. He sat on the bed, taking in the pregnancy of Grisel, his wife, the woman from Formosa, the thin provincial with fair skin and straw-colored hair, her brown eyes already tired, despite her age, from the thread and needle, her fingers pricked because she worked at night and in the dim light.
He approached her, squatted beside her, and began to observe her.
"Keep going, keep going," he urged her when she stopped, puzzled.
She asked him to teach her. It was like suppressing his male pride, she thought, but he showed none of it. Curiosity seemed to have trampled or ignored such an overestimated sense of self-worth, and what was in Leopoldo's eyes was interest, intense interest, as if he were now discovering what he had been unknowingly waiting for.
The next morning he went to the mattress workshop to ask if there was a job opening. The boss looked at him suspiciously; the workshop was mostly staffed by women who glanced up from their sewing tables and snickered at him. But Leopoldo was a strong man; the muscles in his shoulders showed he could lift mattresses with ease, and more than one at a time.
"Let me see those hands," the other man said, a Pole judging by his accent. As he examined the calluses on his palms, feeling the hardened areas, he seemed to be evaluating him for piano playing. But in the end, it was almost the same, except the needles in the mattress shop were bigger and more dangerous, and the threads thick and strong.

-And you know about this, friend?
"My wife taught me," he said, swallowing his pride like a bitter, rancid drink. "My wife is expecting a boy, she can't do this job, so here I am."
The Italian took off the cap he always wore, which was a bit too small for him, and on his face there was a disguised plea.
He started in the workshop in the afternoon. He made many mistakes, but Krakovsky, the Pole, put up with them, teaching him many techniques and secrets that he would later apply when the Italian opened his own business. They would talk and stay after hours; they were the only men in the workshop, all the women left at seven in the evening. In a few weeks they became friends, or rather, work buddies.
"So, how are things with the girls?" the Italian asked, in confidence. They were drinking beer and looking at the empty workshop where his voice echoed.
Krakovsky laughed.
Most are prim and proper or old and not worth it. The girls, yes, the little ones I hire for their delicate hands, for those lovely fingers that get into the mattresses and…
The man stopped, embarrassed. The Italian guessed, the Italian understood, and kept quiet. Krakovsky was a refined man, a cultured man; it showed in his manner of speaking and the words he used, and above all in his gestures and his attire. The way he had touched his hands that first day, exploring them, was like a disguised caress.
They talked about their families.
"We came from Warsaw, fleeing the Cossacks—my grandparents, my grandparents' cousins, and the whole Krakovsky gang. I wouldn't vouch for my relatives in this city; you probably already know what they're up to: prostitutes and drugs. But my side of the family is different. My great-aunt was a down-on-her-luck countess, you know. She died a long time ago in a little ranch in Santa Fe, half-crazy, they say."
"It happens in the best of families," joked the Italian. "My parents were Sicilian, from Portopalo, way down in the heel of Italy, facing the sea that batters the coast."
"The wind and the sea, how lovely," said Krakovsky. "Very poetic."
Does that seem right to you, my friend? People are starving because nothing can be grown; they live off fishing, which the sea allows when it's

not rough, and that only happens very rarely. We're tough, my friend, cold and dry as the wind.
"But it's not the same, Tano, as having been through the war. The Cossacks, if you saw them, are predatory animals; they wound, rape, dismember, and burn the remains. And then the flies come to cover the feast with a black blanket, a wall, a shell as thick as the earth. War is worse than death."
-Worse than hunger? My old man told me that one winter in the village they killed two sick boys, two invalids who did nothing but eat, and they ate them, just like that.
-The parents? How awful!
-What do I know, if it wasn't the parents, it was the neighbors, it doesn't matter.
"But what the Cossacks did, my friend..." Krakovsky took a handkerchief from his trouser pocket and covered his face.
-Don't be a sissy, Ariel, have a drink.
When he approached the Pole, the latter grabbed his hand and forcefully brought it to his face.
-Tano, Tano, I've never told anyone this, but you, Tano, are a friend like no other. All those women judge me and make fun of me, they despise me.
-Come on, Pole, calm down.
The Italian was uncomfortable, and yet he could share with the Pole some time, a quality of time that was far from being shared with other men or with his family.
-What's wrong? Tell me.
The Pole uncovered his face, tearful and ashamed. He crumpled his handkerchief and said:
"They broke into my house, where I lived with my parents in Warsaw. There were three of them, man, they killed them right there, and they grabbed me and dragged me onto the bed where my parents' bodies were. They undressed me and touched me all over, and... what can I tell you, man, what they did to me, so many, many years ago, but it's like seeing myself on those mattresses, lying there, a nine-year-old boy alive between two dead bodies, but half-dead himself for the rest of his life."
That night, the Italian fell asleep in the chair across the table, amidst the empty bottles and broken glasses. When the first of the workers arrived at

five-thirty, she swore uproariously, but they ignored her and got to work as usual. That evening, he returned home and told his wife nothing, though she, worried and angry, silently questioned him. He appreciated this silence, which was like the absence of the Sicilian wind, which bestowed a false peace before the storm.

The storm arrived, and it was Germán's death first, as they called him. Grisel Ponce de Libertella was scarred for life. The wrinkles on her forehead seemed to reflect a film recorded on the day of the accident, when she heard the familiar clatter and rumble of the locomotive, so accustomed to it that as the engine passed, pulling the cars, life within a hundred meters was suspended in a silence akin to a limbo, a silence that took on the significance of a profound and conciliatory peace, a forgetting that, nevertheless, was very brief. Then, the abrupt silence of the station stop didn't arrive as usual, but was replaced by the locomotive's terrible wails, the screech of brakes she had rarely heard so loud, and then the screams of the people.

Grisel dropped the ladle she'd been using to stir the midday stew, her heart leaped, and searching around for her three-year-old son, she couldn't find him in the kitchen, the bedroom, or anywhere else in the house. She ran out to the sidewalk, drying her hands with her apron on, and found the neighbors running, some toward the weeds behind the house and along the tracks, others simply staring at her in bewilderment. She ran toward the tracks, ignoring the pleas and even the insults, and saw the tall grass flattened, and in front of her, the immense machine that hadn't stopped emitting its puffs and black vapors, or whatever it was it was spewing from its sides and above, darkening the sky. But she didn't see Germán anywhere.

What was she going to see, the poor woman?! What was she going to find of her son, if before that monster the boy was like a tiny ant on the tracks? She began to weep and knelt down, knowing what had happened because everyone looked at her as if she were guilty. Because she was, she told herself. Everyone is right, she repeated in her mind, I forgot about my son, the only thing I should have been taking care of while my husband was at the workshop, the only thing that mattered. Food, what did it matter! The house, what did it matter! Shopping, what did it matter! Only the boy was essential, the only thing her husband and the world expected of her, and

above all, the only thing she expected of herself. The minimal ability to watch with her eyes the boy's movements, his coming and going around the house and the yard, his calls, his tantrums and his serene peace while sleeping, because even while he slept it was necessary not to take her eyes off him, he could choke, he could suffocate with his own snot, if they had even told her about the dreaded *sudden death* that she had feared with horror during the first year.

Now, however, the boy would no longer move and there would be no risk to him.

She looked up at the man standing in front of her. He held a filthy, blood-soaked cloth in his arms. Inside was Germán, broken into who knows how many pieces, torn apart by the immense, unpunished killer who watched everything with iron eyes. She would have liked to kick her until she broke her own bones, but then she saw the man in the motorman's cap hanging from a bar in the cab. The man was looking at her, sad, of course, grief-stricken, but more than that, stunned, that was the word. He had killed many in his years of service, the suicides, above all, the idiots, too, and even the poor dogs for whom he couldn't even stop the beastly machine he was responsible for driving. But this, my God, this fifty-year-old man must have been thinking, at least, had never happened to him before. And because the pain was so incomprehensible, she realized that he blamed her too.

Then came everything we all know: firefighters, police, social workers, doctors, nurses, and countless papers fluttering like birds of ill omen around the wake, the funeral, and the mourning that followed. The people in the neighborhood grew accustomed to it; the need to feel guilt is often a reaction to the incomprehensible, or rather to what one refuses to accept, only to collapse under its own weight, grim and devoid of reason, and anguish takes its place.

The anguish persists.

But Grisel couldn't look Leopoldo in the eye. He said nothing, he wept alone for many days, even on his way to work, crying on the bus and as he walked along the sidewalk. A man's cry, of course, barely visible through his clouded eyes and a hand he repeatedly brought to his face to wipe away what looked like sweat but was something else entirely, less salty and thick. His coworkers at the workshop pitied him, and during the year of

mourning he slept with one or two, it's true, and he even wanted to boast about it when he came home and sat down at the table before the plate of food Grisel had prepared, herself sitting on the other side of the table, so calm, he told himself, cooking as if nothing had happened, like the day she stirred the pot instead of watching the boy. But then he read the somber verses on his wife's furrowed brow, who, leaning on the table, didn't eat. She, in turn, heard in the man's eyes the silent clamor of insults.
"Kill me," he told her one night, just like that, while they were having dinner.
He dropped the fork, stood up, grabbed her arm, and led her to the bed. That night, perhaps, the twins were conceived.

2

Some things I learned during those afternoons while having tea, listening to her more attentively than her children did, because I too saw that film repeated on her forehead, something like a silent film worn by time, fragmented by careless scissors. Others, Germán, the twin, as they called him, told me, because this boy, unlike his brother, had been born withdrawn, or dulled.
His mother didn't talk about it, but they told me about his birth as if it were an epic tale. Events that, of course, his parents had recounted to them, elevating them to a kind of legend. Germán had been born almost five minutes after Álvaro, when the midwife and the doctor had already given up hope of delivering him, ready to perform a cesarean section. But suddenly, a cry was heard. Ever since his parents had learned of the twin pregnancy a year and a half after the accident, they were convinced that some divine entity was returning the one who had been taken from them. God, providence, or whatever it was, because neither of them was particularly religious, and this was unusual coming from their families: a woman from the provinces of Formosa and a son of Italian immigrants. However, I later learned from my parents the reason why they didn't

approve of me associating with them. The Libertellas came from Sicily, and popular belief placed them within the realms of the mafia or political anarchy. And the not-so-innocent provincial girl was the niece or goddaughter, who knows, of one of those strongmen who formed dynasties in the northern provinces and who disguised themselves as Catholics to cover up their shady dealings. Why had Grisel Ponce come here if she was so close to power? Either something had happened between the then-teenager and her uncle or godfather, whatever it was, or that side of the family had fallen out of favor with the strongman of the day.
The thing is, when the twins were born, and especially after that highly symbolic episode in which Germán seemed to die and then revive, they no longer had any doubt that their lost son had been returned to them. And what the parents thought but kept to themselves, the neighborhood took it upon itself to discuss and elevate to the level necessary for it to become a myth. Germán, the twin, was viewed with respect and even a certain devotion by the women. Grisel appreciated all of this, and even sometimes found solace in the care and dedication the neighbors offered her, now that she had a double responsibility. However, the intention, being excessive, began to crumble, and Álvaro, the firstborn, the only original, so to speak, was slowly neglected and, over the years, left to his own devices, or almost. The truth was that no one had ever seen such a respectful and quiet boy: he didn't throw tantrums, he didn't fight, but rather argued, simply, with the reasoning of an adult, or perhaps even better. Álvaro read and was meticulous with his schoolwork, and Germán, with so many eyes watching him and so much supervision, took advantage of that devotion, which surely stifled him, and that's why he defied it with the excesses he indulged in: crossing the avenue without obeying rules or pleas, jumping off slides and climbing trees, and even playing on the train tracks, occasions when the neighbors would raise a huge outcry. But the twins grew up, and the fateful age of three passed, although the danger remained, increasing into a kind of torture to which Grisel was condemned. The neighbors, however, grew tired of it, and it was then that Germán, almost alone, compared to the watchful eyes he had had on him until then, felt self-conscious, and clinging to his brother like never before, he looked at him like a lost boy returning home after a long night of mischief in which he found nothing but exhaustion and emptiness.

When I met them, or rather when I became their friend around the age of nine, they were very similar in both appearance and character. Álvaro was more outgoing now that he had an accomplice and a companion, and Germán carried his books to school, always together, as if they weren't twins but Siamese twins. The other boys' teasing didn't intimidate them, and if they fought, they fought together, and they always won, so the other boys stopped bothering them. They were good students, but Álvaro stood out, and Germán was always a copy, exactly the same, but slightly blurred like those carbon copies.

The father already owned his own mattress-making workshop, which he had opened in his own home. Upon becoming a father of two, he spoke openly with Krakovsky, who was more of a friend than a boss or colleague. He visited the family almost every Sunday at noon or Saturday night. They were looking for a girlfriend for him, but he wanted nothing to do with it. One Saturday they talked in the courtyard, when the trains were thinning out at that hour. Smoking, sitting beside the wall that now separated them from the weeds where the dead boy had wandered off, he expressed his concern.

"Open your business," the Pole advised him.

-What fly are you talking about?

-You don't need anything more than the machinery, you already have the workshop and the clientele.

Seeing that the Italian was looking at him attentively, he moved the chair closer, put one hand on his shoulder and pointed to the house with the other.

"Make a few adjustments , I'll help you, and you've already built your clientele yourself in my workshop. When they find out you've opened your own business, they'll come on their own."

-But what about you?

-What about me? I've always managed on my own, and I'm not going to be afraid of competition at this point.

At that moment, the twins went out into the yard. They were allowed to stay up late on Saturdays; they played in the yard, sometimes went to the movies. But this time they were bored and sat on the ground listening to the men. They were intrigued by the shared murmurs in husky voices coming from mouths framed by mustaches or unkempt beards. The

cigarettes, especially, and the glasses of wine on the small wooden table. They watched them cross their legs or spread them and slump in, scratching their chests under their open shirts.
The Pole called Germán. From the moment he was born, he had a special fondness for this twin. If he was saved several times from something worse than an accident, it was because of the challenges and the looks with which the Pole had intimidated him. He had spoken to him about their parents' sacrifice, but above all about the first Germán, that ghost no one mentioned anymore, but whom everyone thought about. He had a duty to the dead man, he told him, or would have told him, I suppose, because I know all this from the fragmented comments Germán made to me from time to time, sometimes when we went together to the school bathroom and he stood in front of the urinal, staring at the wall, lost in thought. He never mentioned it when Álvaro was around. Once, waiting for the bus that would take me home to Villa del Parque, so different from theirs, we sat down, and as one bus after another passed by, he told me about the day the Pole spoke to him so seriously that he never dared to risk his life again.
They were in the large workshop, on Rivadavia Avenue, almost at Liniers and near the General Paz bridge. The women chatted over the sewing and overlock machines. The Polish man was looking after Germán, who was waiting for his father to come home. Álvaro had a fever, which had become a habit lately. Too much studying, they told him, too much reading isn't good for the head. If it was a joke, it didn't seem like one. But it would last two or three days, and the next day, as if nothing had happened. Germán was watching the women, perhaps their feet operating the pedals, and from there his gaze would travel up to their legs, and then, who knows, what could be seen in the dark abyss between their legs under their skirts, because few of them wore trousers yet, and most were women over thirty or forty.
Ariel was smoking at his desk, shuffling papers with beads, the cigarette between two fingers, letting ashes fall. He glanced at the boy and caught him lost in the view of the workshop.
"Do you have a girlfriend?" he asked her.
Germán shrugged, and retorted:
-And you?
The Pole laughed.

"Come here, answering machine," he said. "And tell me something, do you treat your mother well? I heard you get into trouble and make her very angry."
Again she shrugged and hid her head, but then immediately raised it to look him in the face.
-That's not my fault...
-And whose then?
- I don't know about the other kid, that one... the one who died.
The Pole looked at him, frowning.
-What do you know?
"Everything, Polish, the old woman never stops talking to the neighbors when I accompany her to the store. She thinks I can't hear, and they look at me with pity."
"Well, that's how women are, kid, they believe in witches because they are witches..."
"Like those?" He pointed to the female workers.
The Pole coughed with laughter, spat out yellow saliva and said:
-Some more than others... the kid turned out to be quite perceptive... but hey, don't get so worked up about it... but what did you say before: *it's the other guy's fault* ?
Germán sat at the Pole's feet, with his legs crossed, playing with an old mattress spring he had found lying around.
-He won't let me sleep...
-It must be because of the trains...
-That's why he gets off at the station, looks out into the courtyard, and calls me.
-You?
-Yes, she doesn't like me, she doesn't like Álvaro.
-And what does he want?
"How should I know? She tells me a lot of things that I forget because I only fall asleep right before going to school, and I fall asleep in the classroom, and the teacher scolds me, and by the afternoon I feel like kicking everything..."
The Pole stood lost in thought, the noise of the machines deafening the air of the cold, rainy afternoon. The radio was broadcasting a military march; Perón's last speech had been jammed, and nothing was known of him. The

Pole didn't care about any of this, but he knew that the Italian was at the back of the workshop, radio pressed to his ear, tearing apart and reassembling mattresses as if trying to fix a bankrupt country, where the springs creaked and the fabric smelled like shit. What the kid was telling him was like a window opening onto his past. In Germán's face, he saw his own terrified expression, which only condescended to yield its place, for a brief moment, to desolation.

“I had an uncle with the same name as me,” he began. “He had a different last name, but you know how it is, he wasn’t his father’s son, but his grandfather’s. What can I tell you, kid, if you don’t know anything about this yet? ” The Pole’s expression was amusing, and he seemed to revel in the lasciviousness of what he was recounting, but looking toward the workshop, however, he was seeing other scenes and other times. “The thing is, this second cousin—because he was the son of a great-aunt of mine, a Polish countess who came to America at the end of the century—killed himself by jumping overboard into the Paraná River. And the worst part of all, the caimans ate him.”

Germán stared at him, speechless and excited. The Pole heard the boy's racing heartbeat, which was evident in his panting breaths, and said:

"If your mother could hear me, but it doesn't matter, none of this will impress you, I'm sure. This boy was only a few years older than you. Why did he kill himself? Who knows… It was practically a family legend when I was born, and they told it to me to make me behave, scaring me into ending up crazy like my namesake. And I was scared, of course, but not because of what the family told me, which were made-up stories to frighten me, silly tales taken from books but with a family name. I was scared when I saw him for the first time. I was on the beach, on vacation in Mar del Plata, near the lighthouse. Back then there was nothing but miles and miles of sand and dunes, and far away the cliffs, and the sea, immense, gloomy, yes, because it was cloudy." I saw him walking along the beach, a skinny boy, so alone in that vast expanse of deserted sand, a redundancy upon another, multiplying into a single figure. You don't understand, it doesn't matter, I didn't understand it myself, but it was a solitude composed of hundreds of overlapping solitudes, one on top of the other, and all of them seemed unique. When he arrived, I saw his austere, white face, his hair as blond and thin as that of a macabre angel, macabre because of its coldness

and inexpressiveness: a dead angel. I'm talking nonsense, I know, but I'm using exaggerated words to make you understand the absurdity of what was happening to me. In front of me was my other self, or perhaps he saw me as if he were seeing me from the outside. The other was me, and I was him, or perhaps my familiar self was the memory of oblivion remembering itself in the future.

Germán looked at the Pole, this time half scared, not knowing whether to laugh or run away.

"Don't be scared, I'm not crazy. This boy told me to come with him. He picked me up from the sand where I'd been playing; I was seven years old then, maybe a little older. I followed him a few meters toward the shore. We went into the water; the shallow waves lapped at my feet, then my knees, then my waist, and when I was covered up to my chest and I stopped, he grabbed my hand. I couldn't touch the bottom and I started to panic. The waves were crashing against my face, I was choking and coughing, but his hand wouldn't let go."

The Pole stopped, his hand holding the cigarette was trembling, and his eyes were fixed on Germán's face.

"And what happened?" he asked.

I sank, and when I woke up, I was on the sand. My father had pulled me out of the water. My father, the countess's nephew, the cousin of the first Ariel Krakovsky, even though that wasn't his legal surname. My father, damn it… so much like me, that other one who had tried to drag me into the water. And only then did I realize that he had grabbed me with only one hand, because if he had used both, he would have dragged me down. Maybe I was left floating and Dad rescued me; perhaps my teenage hand didn't even have the strength to pull my weight against the force of the waves trying to carry me to the beach. It was the first and only time, and from then on he never tried to touch me, because he knew his body was weak, and the race to convince him began, a race that never ended. He would appear at night, in my bedroom, and I would immediately feel the urge to go to the bathroom. There, I would turn on the bathtub faucets and stare at the water until it overflowed, and my mother's scream would save me from getting in. Other times it was at the river, any river, and he would appear and discourse like a scholar, showing me the drawings he had made of naked men and women, and inviting me to bathe with them. Even his voice

was like a gentle flow of water, and the drops of saliva that splashed from his lips would touch my face, inviting me. And when he wept, remembering who knows what (rivers, wars, crucifixes, axes), his tears were an invitation difficult to refuse. He wants to take me, because he still appears, weaker, it's true, toward the substance of his death. How did I manage to escape? I suppose distance and time had something to do with it. A more or less distant relative whose blood was mixed with that of other strangers. That was, I suppose, both his weakness and my strength.

The Pole stroked Germán's head, and he seemed drunk, even though he only drank the little bit of liquor he saved for the afternoon to share with the Italian when they closed up shop. But the bottle was almost empty.

"How could I not understand you, kid? I know your fear as if it were my own. And I wonder what will become of you, if the one chasing you is your own brother, your very own flesh and blood. He's powerful, I imagine."

Germán got up from the floor where he had been kneeling the whole time. The spring he had been playing with had hurt his fingers, which were bleeding. The Pole wiped the blood away with the handkerchief he took from his back pocket. They looked into each other's eyes.

"You're brave," he told him, admiring in the boy a strength he himself had never possessed. "I'm going to give you a talisman. It's not an object, but a word, and you have to say it when he arrives."

The boy's eyes shone with hope, as if finally freed after a long time, as long as his life. He would no longer need to shout, rebel, or angrily condemn the whole world.

" *Vendetta* ," said the Pole. "Your people use it, kid, because you're an Italian even though you were born in Buenos Aires." " *Vendetta* , just like I say it." The Pole bit the knuckle of his index finger and pronounced the word with his accent. He asked Germán to imitate him.

The boy did as he said, and the word emerged as if spoken by an old adult, as old as time itself, smelling of dampness and distance, of turned earth and croaking birds, and the birds became the workshop machines, gradually shutting down, as if the birds were settling down to rest, one after another. And then came the plain, everyday reality, the chatter of cicadas or the chatter of women leaving the workshop, greeting each other, laughing, protesting.

The Italian man appeared at the office door and said:

-Did you have fun, boys? Let's go home, Germán, your mother is waiting for us.
He must have seen her face, saddened and full of silence.
-What's the matter?
He didn't answer her. From then on, the necessary silence and austere behavior were enough. At home, they wondered why he had changed so much, but not even Álvaro, his twin, knew.

3

Germán told me all this about two years after that conversation with the Pole. He said he didn't know then the meaning of the word the Pole had given him as a talisman. He said he asked his father, who had told him about Sicily and the famous Italian mafia and all the myth that had grown up around a simpler, perhaps more brutal, truth. The necessary air of mystery was also present in the Italian's words when he spoke of his grandfather, his arrival in Buenos Aires for the well-known economic reasons, the misery of postwar Europe, and all that. But Grandfather Libertella had returned to Sicily when Leopoldo was already grown. They had called him back, he said one day, and he went to the port and waited in a boarding house on the riverbank for the first ship bound for Italy. It was just the two of them, Leopoldo, now a nineteen-year-old working at the port doing any job, and the old man, still strong enough to sing and drink whatever he needed until he forgot the reason he had returned.
They had called him, he had said, and Germán's father grew tired of asking until he resigned himself to staying alone in Buenos Aires. He watched him board the ship and disappear behind the rusted iron that peeked out from all parts of the old vessel, wearing his beret and worn suit, and carrying his leather suitcase with straps tied together because the buckles were broken. They never wrote to each other; what was the point, if in that way, without knowing anything and without seeing each other, each one's life lasted for the other as long as his own.

Something like that helped Germán understand the talisman. He told me about it that afternoon when we finally boarded the bus that would take me home. He was simply walking with me; he would take the bus back later, but in the meantime, sitting in the last seat, he said to me:
I never really understood why the word *"vendetta"* can protect me from the death the other person wants to bring me to. If he's the one who wants revenge, why do I have to say it?
After what he told me about the Pole, I drew my own conclusions, but I let him continue his deductions on his own, or almost on his own; a little nudge would help him. We were nine or ten years old at the time, and I'm amazed to remember how we thought and what we thought about. It wasn't about games, but about life and death. And above all, about ghosts, whether real or imagined.
They say a curse is countered by its opposite, but to undo it…
"She opposes it herself," he interrupted. "Isn't that right?"
I shrugged, and let him continue.
Do you think I am him, or rather, that he is me? That if he hears me say the same thing he's looking for, he'll be confused?
I told him again that you couldn't be sure about those things, that they were more like crazy ideas. He thought about it. Some old women were looking at us with annoyance because we wouldn't give them our seats, not realizing that we weren't on that bus, but rather out there, perhaps, traveling through celestial worlds of thoughts and atrocious speculations.
Germán crossed his arms, drew his legs up, and put his feet up on the seat. While the other passengers watched us disapprovingly, he began to say:
What if we're not two? What if we're just one? One can't fight alone. What if what will kill me is in my own head?
-Do you mean that the Pole invented that character to justify the suicide he never dared to commit?
Germán looked at me, devastated. I put my arm around his shoulders and told him not to worry, that I wasn't crazy, and then we laughed. People laughed a little at those two strange boys too.
We arrived at the corner of my street. The bus stop for the return trip was across the street. This time I stayed until it arrived and I got on, it was almost midnight. The cars were thinning out, and the lights from the porches of the houses cast a dim glow on the sidewalk. We were in the

middle of the darkness, under a tree with a sign indicating the bus route number nailed to it.

He whispered to me about the last time he'd seen the other Germán. It was at the house, now remodeled as a workshop and mattress store, which his father had fixed up after leaving the Pole. The gleaming glass and wood counter, the long, heavy rolls of fabric on the shelves along the back wall, the jars of glue, the tins of rivets and screws, the single, almost industrial-sized sewing machine that the Pole had helped him pay for, mortgaging part of his own workshop. "Why are you doing this, Pole?" the Italian had asked him. "So much generosity, man, it's not right." The Pole, not knowing what to answer, sometimes opted for silence and cigarette smoke; other times, he'd say, "For the boys." But he surely only meant one of them.

One of those nights, Germán woke up because the *other man* was calling him from the patio wall. Trying to hide from him, to escape him, he went to the workshop, which wasn't very big yet, built behind the house on land reclaimed from the weeds next to the train tracks. There stood the brand-new mattress-sewing machine, twice as tall as Germán, mounted on iron pillars, with multiple pedals and wheels and pulleys where the threads spun and wound until they reached the arm that moved up and down with the needle as thick as a strong man's finger, piercing the fabrics and leather.

"Come here," the other man said, standing next to the machine. "Do you know how it works?"

His voice, in the silence of the dreary suburban night, sounded like a disconsolate moan.

Yes, Germán replied.

Then turn it on.

Germán hesitated.

You're scared.

The statement, because he had heard correctly and it wasn't a question, which he could have ignored, filled him with anger.

He approached the switch and turned the lever. The motor began to run slowly, starting with effort, and the pulleys started one by one, and the threads turned and the great iron arm moved up and down, and in complete darkness, the needle pierced the air.

The other man suddenly reached in just before the needle's arm descended. Germán could only manage to grab his arm, but he himself was now next to the arm with the needle that had just finished rising and would soon begin to descend, so quickly that his perception of time was confused by its ups and downs. Fast or slow, seconds or hours. The other man's hand was free and held Germán's hand at the exact spot where the needle would pierce it. It wasn't a train, but it was a machine nonetheless, and like all machines, without brain or feeling, it created monsters as it created gods. The difference lay in the hand that drove it. Even the scar on an ordinary piece of silk could be a flaw on the face of God.
And Germán shouted, or it was his father, awakened by the noise. Or it was both of them, but Germán clearly shouted: " *Vendetta!*" and repeated it three times, until he could no longer stop crying in his father's arms, who hugged him tightly, as if he wanted to crush him in his anger, fear, and despair, while his mother, in her dressing gown, watched from the doorway of the workshop, embracing Álvaro, who for the first time began to explore the depths of what at first he believed to be the madness of his twin brother, until he too fell, like someone who slips from leaning too far over the edge.

Álvaro started hanging around me. He'd noticed I was getting too close to his brother, and after the incident in the workshop, a confusing and murky mix of conflicting emotions swirled in his head, like concentric circles that, upon reaching their center, expanded again, pounding against the inner walls of his skull and threatening to pierce it. It was then that the tranquility and level-headedness he'd displayed until then began to be disrupted by sporadic bouts of bad temper. At first, he tried to contain his anger, or his rage, because there was no way to describe what was happening to him.
Jealousy? Envy? Weariness? Ambition?
All of those were possibilities not only for the strange relationship between the twins, but for any relationship between siblings. And one day I felt a connection with Álvaro.
It was at a spring picnic the school had organized at the Palermo lakes. Around us, the traffic of Libertador and Sarmiento avenues, the Planetarium nearby, and the San Martín memorial standing as an

indispensable reminder. Away from the rest of the group, we sat on the grass, ate sandwiches, but didn't talk about women, only politics. When Álvaro got into the subject, he had the discernment of a mature and uncompromising man.
-Do you realize, Bautista, what's happening? Look over there.
He stretched out his arm, pointing toward the planetarium, that building that looked like an alien spaceship designed by Hollywood for a B-movie, so incongruous with the hitherto so French-influenced Buenos Aires. But he was referring, of course, to the lines of soldiers guarding the park, and the tanks parked along the avenues. Nearby, San Martín on his stone horse was a symbol of his legacy, or what it had become: the impotence of stone, absolute immobility, inert indifference. Only ghosts, sometimes, frightening with warnings or their mere presence, can occasionally change certain behaviors, though I can't guarantee they achieve much. But who pays attention to a stone, no matter how well sculpted? Perhaps an incorruptible beauty can achieve that in the very long term, but monuments are not the Venus de Milo or the Winged Victory of Samothrace, not even The Kiss or David, which have pierced the collective psyche and that is why they have persisted. However, the memory of our national heroes is as fragile and, above all, as versatile as the documents found on their desks: genuine, forged, fabricated, and planted by outsiders, like in a police raid searching for drugs. Things we've all seen on the news, things that are said and discussed by word of mouth. Whoever has a rifle in their hand holds the power of the moment.
I told Álvaro all this, and he looked at me respectfully, but sullenly.
-What? You don't agree?
-Yes, Bautista, but I don't believe you.
I laughed.
-What do you mean?
I was ready to punch him to liven up that boring spring day we were having.
He was looking towards the Planetarium, not at the soldiers stationed around it, but up above.
-What's wrong with you? Do you see Martians?
I was infuriated by that boasting of superiority that was expressed through suspicious, evasive glances and measured silence.

He remained silent, now looking towards my head, and said:
-Germán told me you're a crow.
What was the point of that nonsense?
-What? Did you go crazy like your brother?
His expression changed, and I didn't see his fist coming until it hit me squarely in the face. We started fighting on the grass for what seemed like an eternity, while the other kids came running up, laughing and egging each other on. The shouting was deafening. The teachers arrived after the counselors, who tried to separate us, but we, even though we weren't more than ten years old, were like two little animals locked together by fury, two vermin electrified by the mere touch.
Then the police appeared. What's going on? What's happening? Military voices and the sounds of metal. I imagined the bullets they would fire at us, but it wasn't a war, just a children's fight, and yet the hatred was similar. The teachers apologized while also asking for help; they feared and admired the soldiers, so handsome, so manly next to the effeminate teachers who hadn't even done their military service because they were scrawny and sick.
They separated us. I saw the faces beneath their helmets, with neatly shaven beards and dark eyes. Their weapons were at their backs, and their arms held me tightly, as they did Álvaro. I saw him glaring at me, and he started calling me "Crow, Crow!" Then I thought I understood what he meant: the black leather straps of the helmet of the soldier holding me behind me were loose and swung violently with my struggles. And I saw, in the dark glasses of the other soldier in front of me, the one holding Álvaro, my darkened reflection with black wings or birds fluttering around my head.
It was a revealing day, indeed, because although we identified with the similarity of our willpower turned into anger, which over the years learned to be contained and blended into seemingly passive behaviors, he with his mattress sewing, me pounding on my typewriter, we both worked for opposing, irreconcilable ideas, rooted not so much in intellect but in resentment.
The soldiers, I don't know why, took us home. I learned later that the Libertella family had been warned about Álvaro's bad behavior, because of the thoughts he had expressed along the way despite his young age, and

because of the sullen face Leopoldo, a laborer, Italian, and almost poor, made when he received them at the door on the corner of Villa Luro, not letting them in, with the boy between two tall soldiers and his face smeared with idiotic war masks.

In my house in Villa del Parque, the soldiers entered because, although they didn't know my father, they had been told to treat me with care. Castel Beltrame was an intellectual with deeply ingrained ideas in the new politics—that is, in what was considered acceptable and what fit the circumstances. In his youth, Castel Beltrame had written a book of short stories, which he preferred to forget, and later some political philosophy in two books, the second of which gradually drew him closer to what was happening in the country. The struggle to overthrow Perón had philosophical underpinnings beneath the political ones; at least, that was the narrative being promoted in the media. The people, of course, were only interested in economic gains, but there was also the ideological sentiment that had to be overcome, and which had to be suppressed with weapons if it couldn't be persuaded. My father, in his newspaper articles and radio commentaries, seemingly far removed from the military, apparently impartial due to his lucid intelligence and culture (his sister, my aunt Aurora, was an outstanding concert pianist), gave the ideal image of intelligent work and the exact measure of things.

However, the procession moved slowly, gathering members and strength beneath Rivadavia Avenue or Juan B. Justo Street, as if descending into the drains, breathing in the sewers. The squelching of boots in the filth and the cracks of weapons being readied filled the air.

That night, my father sat me down at his desk, behind which stood countless shelves of books that both attracted and intimidated me with their sheer quantity, the immense patience required, and the sheer impossibility of ever reading them all. He asked me what had happened in Palermo. I told him everything in detail, and I had to reveal my escapades and my friendship with the Libertellas. "How long have you been hanging around them?" he asked. I had to tell him the truth, without fear of the punishment those law books seemed so eager to pronounce.

His expression didn't change much; he just frowned, interlacing his fingers over his gray shirt and tie. He was still on the clock, receiving potential clients until ten at night, and friends—all intellectuals—and later,

plainclothes military men I hadn't been able to distinguish before. I had no one to blame. Separated from my wife when I was barely born, my mother was a stranger, perhaps dead, but her memory was never mentioned, neither favorably nor unfavorably. My father wasn't a believer, but he was considerate of the Catholics, who tolerated him because of his intelligence and good sense.

It was already nine o'clock at night and we hadn't had dinner. The study window overlooking the back park was open, and the curtains moved in the breeze that the arrival of spring hadn't been able to tame; winter was resisting until the very last moment. The curtains were practically flying as I awaited the verdict. The *voile curtains* swirled, swayed, and rose, and they weren't white, but dark like the night light reflected in them. My father, seated in his French-style chair, was a rigid man with a compassionate gaze, an incongruity I never understood, one that overwhelmed me and yet could never make me hate him, no matter how hard I tried. His blue eyes were compassionate, but his face and body were as perfect as they were expressionless. When I saw him on the beach in Mar del Plata, with his bare torso, firm at his age, well-trained despite his passive intellectual activity, I wondered if perhaps it wasn't in our genes to maintain that manly form of our image, that of the Beltrame family, who always came out on top in any seemingly conflictive or compromising situation.

The curtains formed wings around the chair where I was sitting, and I remembered the beach afternoons near the lighthouse as we walked along the seashore, side by side, him tall, me small and looking at him enraptured by his figure and his confidence, with my hands behind my back and the seagulls circling very high, of course, but from my height, it was as if the seagulls were circling around my father's head.

And now the dark curtains were doing the same, but they were like crows. The punishment consisted of being locked in the library for the entire weekend.

Admirable, truly admirable. It was a lesson that didn't cost me too much, even though I felt the changes of puberty growing inside me, confusing, unsettling, and painful. But the mind, I learned then, can plunge into vast, interconnected spaces or into abysses where the body is less than a speck of dust, and the "dustings" I would indulge in, of course, years later, were

simply the occasional respite my body needed to give me peace. And among the books, I found many explanations and also many solutions that turned out to be fallacious, but the active universe of that library, which nevertheless never moved from its place and didn't make noise like Libertella's workshop, nor manufacture or sell products, vibrated like the well-known restlessness of adolescence at the beginning of spring. Both things coincided, thanks to my old man, who taught me how to survive.
Illustrious Raven.
That was the meaning of our surname, Italian from Veneto, in the north of the peninsula, precisely the opposite end of the world from my friends. My grandfather, a bridge engineer who worked on Italian rivers and later on those of Patagonia, had come from northern Italy and even died working in Bariloche, while his son was studying law in Buenos Aires. He founded the architecture firm that would become famous a few years later, along with the Márquez family; many buildings in Mar del Plata bore his name.

It was curious how the seagulls and crows metamorphose into the behavior of the Beltrame family. White or black, depending on the lens through which they observe us. But is the reason for the change in the lens, or is it the very substance of our souls?
All that weekend I searched through books: *soul, spirit,* whatever you want to call it, and no one could ever define it the way you define a chair to sit on. But what is a chair if not a symbol in our minds?
God is a creation of man, and dies with him.
A bullet to the brain of God annihilates creation.

4

From that time on, I never visited them again. I thought my father would transfer me to a private school, but his prejudices against what the upper class called "popular" never fully convinced him, nor did his paternal concern stem from fear of the twins' bad influence on me. Besides, he was a semi-public figure, talked about in cultural circles, but especially in

official ones. Perhaps it wasn't right that, having always proclaimed his support for public service and the nation's assets, he would withdraw his only son from a public school that, despite all its shortcomings, had a reputation built over many decades of teaching.
I continued to see them during school hours, and occasionally after school, once or twice, wandering around the Liniers workshops, sometimes, or the ones in Haedo, when I had the bright idea of telling Dad that we were meeting at the Martins' country house, where our friend Leticia would take us. We even spent some weekends exploring the park along the sides of the Sarmiento railway tracks, and Rivadavia Avenue, which stretched all the way to where the twins lived in Villa Luro. But when the three of us were alone, sometimes on a Sunday when my father spent the whole day writing in his library without remembering I existed, we would take the train to Caballito or Miserere, and climb down the high walls beside the tracks until we entered the subway tunnels. The darkness, punctuated by the dim lamps, suggested steel monsters thundering down the rails, perched on seemingly fragile pillars, and it was like being trapped in deep coal or tin mines. We smoked, even though it was forbidden, talking about the world. Álvaro, always angry, suspicious, and distrustful, assumed the role of Germán's protector from then on. Germán was no longer rebellious, but submissive, thoughtful, lost in the images that reached him from the dark corners where the spotlights of the iron and wood train cars emanated, swaying, zigzagging on the rails, held up by cables from the ceiling. The afternoon electricity slipped from that den into the street, chasing us. It was like in the horror movies we saw at the cinema, where monsters emerged from nowhere with a simple spark of creation. And even exhausted, sometimes, our faces protected by the anonymity of the gloom, we masturbated in simulated silence, excited not by our own lust, but by the moaning of others that reached us like a lascivious offspring, a wet and newborn creature, formless, larval, typical of the gloom and the rumble of the walls dug in the subsoils of an old city next to the motionless river. Perhaps Álvaro, who always did the opposite of what was expected of him, and who refused to wash his hands in the station restrooms, fell ill because of all of that combined: his stubbornness and his tragic sense of life. He fell ill, with a high fever, on a Saturday night. He collapsed on the bed he shared with Germán, as I learned later, when it was all over, so quickly, I

think now, so quickly it's unbelievable. A weekend where the Libertella family's misfortunes converged with a destiny, perhaps reserved for shady dealings that must always be hidden, even if God himself designed and carried them out. The immense often goes unnoticed by the most suspicious eyes, camouflaged like thousands of chameleons walking the streets of Buenos Aires. Chameleons mimicking cobblestones swollen by recent rains, or by water from the yard that an old woman has thrown buckets of onto the sidewalk. The bluish-green hues of the water and the reptiles' skin move surreptitiously through the gutters, seeping into the sewers, retracing the path of the wastewater, and emerging in the corners of houses, sowing the pervasive mold of tragedies. Tragedies are rarely personal, but rather multifaceted creatures that adapt to the physiology of each man, woman, or child. Economic tragedies are the clearest example, but almost no one focuses on the root causes, only on the meager consequences that proliferate within those homes: deaths, addictions, ruin. A family led astray by poverty is a sad example of the government's good intentions. And what is a government, if not a party, almost always a sinister creature born of the vagaries of bad habits, that plays the game of half-truths and disguised lies? Words, like parliamentary speeches, sow fields of discord.

All these political and philosophical symbols were the result of Álvaro's feverish delirium. He clutched his stomach in intense pain, tossing and turning in bed, while his mother, half-desperate, begged her husband to get a doctor. Germán called me that Saturday afternoon, and again later that evening when his brother's condition was worsening. He told me what his parents were saying, as they couldn't agree. Libertella wanted to take him to the hospital, I think Ramos Mejía, where they treated textile workers, but his mother insisted he call the clinic two blocks away, a private and rather posh one that had recently opened and only treated private patients. The man, sweating and wearing a tank top, held his head in his hands and rubbed his face at the foot of the boy's bed, watching him suffer, unable to contradict his wife. They both remembered the tragedy of the first Germán. What if Álvaro were to leave them now? What strange scheme of exchanged children, of children paid for and returned, did God, Providence, or whatever governs life, have in store for them? Because someone is doing it, undoubtedly. All that tragedy was the product of an

immensely sick mind, not of the simple, selfless, and impartial nature of the people.
By midnight, Álvaro couldn't take it anymore. They had given him aspirin, as was the custom of the neighborhood quacks trained in the classrooms of the sidewalks. They applied poultices recommended by the neighbors, whose experience was based on their own dead children. They took his temperature with a mercury thermometer inserted under his armpit, in his mouth, and even in his anus, because that's what the doctors on the radio recommended. And the curve was a mountain that climbed and climbed until it stopped at a plateau that hovered around forty degrees.
What did they expect?
Certainty.
The only thing no one could give them, and they were unaware of all the other certainties that shone and cried out, but they were blind and deaf. Denial, sometimes, is the paradise of fools, the brief stage before the long epitaph.
Then, at midnight, Leopoldo Libertella picked up his son and left the house, crossed the almost empty avenue at that hour, and walked quickly, followed several meters behind by Grisel, who was now stumbling and carrying a bag with what she had managed to gather from her son's clothes. Germán, from the doorway of the workshop, gradually lost sight of them in the darkness, along with the facades across the street. A block and a half, two blocks away, no more, the white light of the clinic swallowed his family up behind the glass doors.

The Saravia family owned the clinic. The Saravia Clinic, as the sign out front read and as everyone called it, was a strange sight in the Villa Luro neighborhood, even though it was located on the avenue no more than a hundred meters from the train station. People were used to going to the Flores neighborhood for medical appointments or weekend outings, and to Liniers for shopping to fill, if they could, their cupboards or refrigerators. Luro was much more austere and neighborhood-oriented back then. Many wondered why they had installed this clinic, with all its luxuries, as could be seen as the equipment, furniture, and machines were brought in, and the glass doors—a novelty at that time reserved for Florida Street—in this almost isolated neighborhood. Even though it was situated between two

commercial districts, it was a place where only private homes, a few warehouses, and the ubiquitous hardware stores, general stores, and haberdasheries were abundant . After six in the evening, almost everything was dead, and where the traffic on Rivadavia was a stream of water that usually only stopped temporarily on the sidewalks where the buses seemed to barely slow down so that a few brave souls could get off and jump off the running board, mostly workers.

Later, given its proven success and the high demand it generated, no one was surprised by its presence in what we called the asphalt wasteland. Whether it was the surname, already well-known in those years, or the word-of-mouth that spread over time, the clinic became crowded, even though they didn't treat anyone for free. But it was known—and this was crucial—that Dr. Aldo Saravia, the general's son, a doctor for whom his father had bought the old building (where a toy factory had once operated, bankrupted many years before), remodeled it, and furnished it at his own expense, occasionally treated, very preferentially, and of course completely free of charge, the children who came recommended to him. The recommendation could come from anyone, but the channels were always the families who acted as benefactors, associated by kinship or business ties with the military barracks.

Dr. Saravia was a pediatrician, and he dedicated his free time to these generous, free consultations whenever he felt the case warranted it. There came a point when he could no longer manage to balance his private practice with these pro bono services. When faced with the dilemma of choosing one over the other, he decided to sacrifice his private practice. The family, they said—because the general was a frequent visitor to my father's home and had often dined there, just the three of them, discussing current events, me listening in silence—had frowned upon this misguided and ill-conceived act of charity.

"If you give the people a hand, my friend, they'll take the elbow," I heard the old man say in general, but referring to his son.

My father, on the other hand, would shrug and praise Aldo's humanitarianism, which would unknowingly tip the scales, because the general's other three sons, born several years apart to different wives, were also military men. Saravia had managed to remain aloof from military conservatism, or at least from what was understood as such. It was known

that the Saravia ancestors had been Jewish, part of those untold stories that circulate on the margins. Whether converted Jews or not, the current members of the family retained a certain resentment and a natural resistance to the impositions of the established officers. The Gonzagas, staunch Catholics, looked down on them, but couldn't completely disengage from their influence. And the Ansaldis saw them as accomplices they could count on for anything, as long as they kept a close eye on them. The three families ruled and would continue to rule the country for decades, not only politically, but also through business, operating companies whose true owners remained hidden. They controlled the customs offices and borders, owned vast swathes of Patagonia, and controlled the rivers that flowed into the Río de la Plata from the heart of Brazil.

Dr. Saravia was, at that time, an eminent figure who lectured at the Academy of Medicine and sacrificed his trips abroad so as not to neglect his practice for the poor in Villa Luro. What I discovered at dinners at my house was that the general's expression of disenchantment when speaking of his son was more feigned than anything else. When, after dessert, the men went to the study to drink whiskey and smoke, I remained seated, wrinkling a corner of the tablecloth, and half-furious at not being able to continue listening to their conversation. I must have ground my teeth, as was my ingrained habit, without realizing it, because Papa said to me:

-Bautista, come here, please.

I followed them in. I sat down, self-conscious, in the armchair that was practically mine, because it was there that I listened to my father's lectures and reprimands. They gave me coffee, offering it to me without hesitation, like one of them, but they drank liqueurs and smoked English or Russian cigarettes. Then they ignored me, knowing I was all ears. That was my father's way of teaching: learning without teaching.

And amidst all the din of words, phrases, and ideas—contradictory, discussed, open to debate, and then closed like fortresses—I realized the hidden machinations in the speeches, which, even though they were homely, insisted on being correct in appearance, ambiguous in meaning, and certain in their pronouncements as if given in passing, like judges who condemn as if they were selling Sunday bread.

The clinic had been a grand strategy, and the general a kind of grand inquisitor who had one of the main sites of his political witch hunts in the

neighborhood. The doctor, his son, was just another cog in the theatrical machine that was being assembled throughout the country. Businesses, corporations. A network that spread like a spider's web across every sector and every level of society. Recoleta, Barrio Norte, La Boca, Ciudadela, La Tablada—just in the capital and its surrounding suburbs, to mention a few neighborhoods where conflicts grew and intensified, conflicts that, in the end, were nothing more than multiple simultaneous scenes intended to confuse and distract public opinion. Then came the World Cup, but that's another story. During the period I'm describing, clinics were being set up without hesitation and with complete impunity, because no one saw the bare skeletons behind the consulting room screens.
I'm already veering into cheap sensationalism, like the demagoguery practiced back then. But that populism was so deeply ingrained, so superficial, that no one recognized it as such. The very thing they had fought against in Perón, imprisoning and exiling him, they now practiced for their own benefit, not in the barracks, but in civil society. What is hidden is truer than what is obvious. Love can be feigned, but whoever feigns hatred is a clown. Subordinate minds are easily influenced: an idea is sown with the aim of reaping its opposite, and both the landowner and the laborer who worked the land see what was sown, not what was reaped. The world is teeming with collective psychologies, and sane madness is its director.

That Saturday night, Álvaro was admitted to the emergency room. No one mentioned the costs, but the receptionist gave them a sour look when she asked where they lived, especially when she saw the Italian man's calloused hands and the burlap sack they'd hastily crammed the boy's clothes into. Of course, they couldn't refuse emergency care, not in the state he was in. "Those poor, ignorant fools," the secretary assigned to that Saturday shift must have been thinking, already irritated when she could have been enjoying herself with her boyfriend. They'd talk about it when the emergency was over.
"Is Dr. Saravia there?" Grisel asked, with an ingenuousness bordering on foolishness that almost made the secretary laugh, but instead showed indignation.
-The doctor doesn't see patients at these hours, ma'am.

The parents kept quiet and sat down to wait. Álvaro had been taken away on a stretcher, groaning in pain, covered with a sheet up to his chin, and a stretcher-bearer was pushing it toward a dark room behind a white swinging door.
Germán arrived, they told him the news they didn't have yet, that is, nothing more than sleeplessness and worry.
"Go to sleep," the father told him.
Germán, on the other hand, sat in an empty chair next to them. An hour later, a doctor in a white coat appeared.
"Good evening," he said, shaking hands with the parents and ruffling Germán's curly hair while making a gesture of pleasant surprise.
"But how did you get up and I didn't see you?" he joked. "So you're the twin, two peas in a pod, well, almost, they start to look different with age, right?"
Now he looked at Grisel, trying to be friendly, breaking the ice, but his joke was silly.
"How is Álvaro?" she asked.
"What's wrong, doctor?" the father asked.
The tests are still pending, but it looks like appendicitis. Don't worry, it's a routine operation these days.
-But how, are they going to operate on him?
Grisel grabbed her husband's arm.
"It's necessary, ma'am. Look," he began, tired of having to explain something so obvious in those times that these people seemed not to know. He elaborated on what the appendix is and what was customary. They listened, but the priest interrupted him; he already knew all that, he said.
-And when will he have the surgery?
- Once we have all the tests, we'll call the surgeon.
-But who are you, doctor?
-The on-call clinician, Mr. Libertella.
She approached the man, gently squeezed his elbow, as if to establish an emotional bond.
-Your son is already sedated, you can go in and see him for a little while, but try not to wake him up, now that he is no longer suffering.
Germán told me, when he called me from the clinic's payphone a little while later, how strange that phrase seemed to him. The doctor, at that

moment, looked like a priest. I offered to go see him, telling him that my father couldn't refuse me in that case, and if he did, I'd run away anyway. He said no, his parents were very nervous, and my presence would unsettle them after what had happened between the families. I thought that perhaps my father could help pay for the clinic, or get them exempted, because of his influence, of course. I told him so; Germán would mention it to them, but it wasn't the right time.

By the time the opportunity arose, he was no longer able to share my proposal with them.

The operation was scheduled for six in the morning. Dr. Aldo Saravia arrived at five-thirty on Sunday, impeccably dressed in a suit and tie, his hair slicked back, as if he had spent Saturday night at a gala, clean and showing no signs of alcohol. He didn't appear tired, but rather attentive to the Libertella family's concerns.

He ushered them into his office. He had coffee and croissants brought in, and looked at Germán.

And suddenly, it stopped.

"No, miss," she told the secretary who was bringing breakfast. "Nothing to the boy."

The parents looked at each other in fear; the worry that had been subsiding in their spirits was starting up again.

Dr. Saravia, in an austere and deliberate manner, sipping his black coffee and placing the cup on the saucer, said:

"I'd heard something about it, of course. But now that I see the boy, it's given me pause."

Germán looked at everyone alternately, bewildered, from his chair.

-Tell me, ma'am. Were the twins born from your first delivery?

-No, doctor. We had a boy before them, but he died, you know?

Leopoldo intervened to support his wife, who had broken off with a sob.

-He was hit by a train, doctor.

"I'm so sorry, I didn't know that. But getting back to the point…twins are usually, almost without exception, exact replicas, physiologically speaking, of course. Psychological influences are another matter. I've seen this , as a pediatrician, in ninety percent of cases, and I'd say that in that remaining exception, perhaps I was wrong. Genetics is exact; it's we doctors who make mistakes in determining it."

Seeing that the Libertella family's eyes were observing him without any expression, like the eyes of a tame ox, he decided to shorten his remarks, although he took care to lessen the impact he expected.
-As I was saying, twins tend to suffer from the exact same illnesses. If they catch a cold, they have the same predisposition to germs and the same susceptibility of their immune system. Not to mention diseases of genetic origin.
He was making a mess of things, to put it more bluntly, he was getting himself into a muddle. He didn't usually have to explain these cases to people outside his usual circle. In his free practice, the nurses and their assistants acted as intermediaries, and he was merely a wise presence who observed and prescribed from his desk with his pen. When he got up to examine a patient, he put on his gloves deliberately and palpated or listened to their heart in a silence that everyone respected. The patients, in fact, didn't dare ask anything; that was what the assistants were for.
-In summary, I recommend that the little brother also have the operation.
The parents shifted in their seats. Leopoldo placed his cup and saucer on the desk.
-What did you say, doctor? I don't understand.
"Look, Mr. Libertella. Twins are like resonating chambers, let me explain. They're made of the same material. When something breaks down in a car, you'll understand, even if it doesn't seem important, it will soon affect the rest of the machinery. And what might seem cheap at first will end up costing you an arm and a leg. And the car will be dead."
The parents looked at the doctor, and then at Germán.
The consulting room, at half past five in the morning, or almost six, was like a funeral home office, with dim, artificial, cold lighting, the faint breeze of dawn entering through the lower crack of the closed door.
Germán told me all this before they took him into surgery, but his mother and father took him off the phone. I heard them tell him, before he hung up, that it was necessary, that it was also for Álvaro's sake.
"Prevention is necessary," Dr. Saravia had told them, with his wise experience and his extreme patience. What other doctor, of such eminence, would bother to get up at five o'clock on a Sunday morning to dedicate himself entirely to a case for which, as everyone knew even though it hadn't been discussed, he wouldn't be paid?

But that, precisely, was the opportunity. Those who paid should receive what was stipulated in the price. The others, only what was necessary, which is as variable as chaos itself.
Justifications are bred and alibis are fabricated in the variables. That's why the surgery was postponed until eight in the morning, to prepare Germán, who, submissive, allowed himself to be pricked for the tests and undressed while a nurse cleaned him in the bed at the clinic designated for the brothers. In the other bed, sedated and with an IV drip in his arm, lay Álvaro, naked under the sheets. Like him, he was waiting for the operating room, but his breathing was rapid and his heart monitor was racing like a runaway horse. He could even smell the perspiration running down his dripping forehead and soaking the sheets.
The fever, that was what he feared. Not the pain, but the delirium the fever brought on the few times he remembered being in that state. On such occasions, the other Germán would slip in like a thief, without knocking from the patio wall, without rapping on the bedroom door, not even with the sound of his old-soled footsteps on the tiles. He would enter directly into his fever dreams and torment him with memories he couldn't use when he was lucid: the train's whistle like the cries of dying dinosaurs thundering across the pampa in prehistoric times, when there was nothing at all but silvery streams that were now very much like the rails lying on the ground, their footsteps echoing across the surface just like the long iron engines, as vast as those reclining dinosaurs, dragged along by the others, those who had dominated and killed them and then dragged them across the plain among the streams. The Other, the Dead Man, Himself, remembering his past and fighting against his own body.
The body on the bed. Germán, about to be opened up. And Álvaro's agony seemed inevitable. Which of the two was going to die?
He knew, from the beginning, that he was dead, perhaps, and that his body, a mirror of Álvaro's body, was an illusion of the senses.
The surgery was postponed until ten in the morning. The tests hadn't come back entirely clear, but Dr. Saravia said not to worry.
And Álvaro? Would he be able to handle it?
"And the peritonitis, doctor?" Leopoldo asked, hiding his distrust, suppressing his fear.

Saravia hadn't expected that. Damn, he must have thought, the things people read.
"A few hours is nothing in these cases, Mr. Libertella. Sometimes the condition even reverses itself. A few hours of observation are necessary."
At ten o'clock they took Álvaro to the operating room. After two hours, Dr. Saravia came out in his surgical scrubs, with his cap and mask hanging from his neck. He smiled; everything had gone well. Now it was Germán's turn. Pure routine, he said, half an hour at most.
At two o'clock on Sunday afternoon, Germán was placed on the stretcher, awake, watching the ceiling move in the opposite direction, the faces of the doctor and nurses, all covered. He could only see his eyes, which were as deep as kaleidoscopes in a continuous spiral, entering and exiting the depths of his skull. Then he fell asleep, and I can say no more. What happened next can perhaps be imagined: battles within the walls of his mind, the siege of the Other, the fortress of his spirit besieged to the point of irremediable hunger, and finally the collapse of the walls in a thunderous crash of bricks and rubble crushing the bodies of consciousness. And in the pit formed by the cataclysm, they both found each other, alone and unique, screaming.
And there was only one echo.

I stayed home Sunday afternoon. I tried to overcome my misplaced pride and tell my father everything. Knowing Dr. Saravia's father so well, he could surely get favors the Libertellas would otherwise be unable to obtain. I thought about the clinic bill, including the delays and negligence typical of Sunday shifts, especially for people with limited resources. All of that, I thought, was conspiring against Álvaro's health. And then I thought about Germán, about what he'd told me about them operating on him "just in case." That's what he understood from the doctor's speech. If they operated on him today, he wouldn't have to endure the pain his brother had; they'd just put him under, and he'd go home the next day. There was a tremor in his voice—how could he hide it? His teeth were chattering on the phone, and that's what I remember most clearly, the absurd tapping of a skeleton from a comedy film, a cheap histrionic, a pathetic final symbolism for his fatality.

I said nothing. I kept my mouth shut and waited. Dad worked in his study until dinnertime. It wasn't really work, but rather writing and reading related to his profession, which were a kind of oasis for him amidst the demands of the weekdays. I could hear him typing away at a breakneck pace. Sometimes he'd stop, swear under his breath, tear the paper from the carriage, and crumple it up. And then he'd start again, stumbling over the keys, until the sentences began to pick up speed on the paved highways of inspiration.

I stayed in the park with its trees, hidden from the stuffy bustle of the Sunday afternoon siesta: the cars, the voices from the corner café, the discordant honking of the buses. A residential neighborhood was taking shape as the music from Radio Nacional broadcast its classical sounds, flooding the sidewalks and cobblestones, sowing mold on the walls of houses like ours, where my father and I lived alone, with austere furniture that hadn't been changed since I was born, the piano where my Aunt Aurora used to play but no longer visited us, and above all, the books, which were everywhere: shelves, desks, nightstands, chairs, and even in the kitchen, because my father cooked, however well, passing the time by turning pages while he was cooking.

On the radio, the broadcast of a Beethoven symphony was abruptly interrupted. The announcer was reporting the violence that had erupted during the pilgrimage to the Basilica of Luján. At that time, such pilgrimages were not yet an established custom, but rather mere events organized by the diocese, where, strangely, the antagonistic objectives of the various factions within the Church converged. Left-wing priests mobilized their neighborhoods, which grew into massive crowds, in these popular pilgrimages that demonstrated the Faith—yes, with a capital F—of the poor and exploited. Right-wing bishops, conservatives and those aligned with the military movements in politics, could not be outdone if they intended to appear humanitarian according to Christian doctrine. Public opinion recognized the differences, but in practice, it mattered little. The masses were difficult to predict and, above all, to control. Men like my old man, intellectuals who seemingly had no defined ideologies, channeled moderately educated opinion along conservative and peaceful paths, but beneath the surface they fueled the objectives of the military.

The town had flocked to the pilgrimage that weekend. They had set out from Liniers, and along Rivadavia Avenue, and then Route 7, other crowds joined them, chanting and waving banners. This had been happening since Saturday morning, but by Sunday afternoon, when Mass began, the chaos was out of control. The people who had arrived after leaving hundreds of others lying dead along the way had piled up at the entrance to the basilica, because there was no more room inside. Mass had been interrupted several times, and the officiating priest had to be replaced three times due to arguments that were being concealed behind the atrium and even in front of the altar, but above all, out of fear. The gunshots in the plaza were uncertain, sporadic, yet constant thunderclaps. Each shot startled the women trying to follow the Mass. The echoes reverberated through the high ceilings of the cathedral, and there were even dead birds falling from the nests that used to form under the domes.

At six in the evening, Beethoven's Fifth Symphony was abruptly interrupted by the bugles of the military march. National Radio announced a forty-eight-hour state of siege due to the riots in Luján. The Mass was no longer the usual one; the sacrificial lamb was no longer Christ depicted on his cross atop one of the church's many columns, nor the symbol of the consecrated host: a boy had been dragged toward the altar, and the priests —who knows where they had come from or what influence had possessed them—seemed to have traveled back in time to pagan temples, or more precisely, to the very beginnings of the Church: the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world had to be an innocent child. The boy, the announcer recounted, his voice trembling with fear as he witnessed the sacrifice, lay naked on the altar, and blood stained the white altar cloths with lace trim that the devout women of the diocese had sewn with blessed thread.

Dad appeared in the park and stood beside me, with one hand on my shoulder, his eyebrows furrowed, listening to the radio.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

He told me to be quiet.

Germán's operation ended at six in the evening, as I later learned. There had been complications, an allergic reaction to the anesthesia, they said at first, then to the antibiotics. "Had they removed his appendix, like his

brother?" his parents asked. Dr. Saravia, tired after so many hours of surgery, took off his glasses, cleaned them with gauze, and said that everything had gone as expected. What did that mean? Everything, even the complications, had been taken into account; but like any surgery, it had its margin of chance, still unknown to science. "Medicine is not a perfect science," he said, looking down from his slight height at the parents, who, although one was robust and sturdy, and the other somewhat plump, had to refrain from looking down on him, as if Saravia were the God deciding the fate of his children. They had signed the consent form for the operation; they understood that the surgery was necessary because the risk that Álvaro was managing with such effort, Germán might not be able to bear when the time came. It was better now, while he was healthy and strong. In the clinic's hallways, people talked about the events in Luján and their repercussions in the surrounding towns. A helicopter had crashed into the basilica after being fired upon by extremist groups. The government hadn't issued a statement; all that was known was that the president had climbed onto an army tank, coordinating strategies with the Gendarmerie and the Air Force. Dr. Saravia was seen on the phone several times, in brief calls, perhaps with his father, the general, who, it was said, had been deployed with his army platoons to surround the extremists. Bombs, fires in the grasslands adjacent to the cathedral grounds, the onset of suffocation inside the nave after the Gendarmerie threw tear gas and other, more lethal, bombs that were never mentioned in the media, but which everyone knew existed and were being used. The sacrificial mass, which was so widely discussed afterward, was neither a rehearsal nor was it performed by left-wing atheists disguised as priests, as was initially suggested. Government media advisors had to adapt their arguments as the opposition dismantled them. The much-discussed rise of the left, feared and combated in the Senate, which threatened Argentine customs rooted in Catholicism, did not align with the reports that the priests who had prepared the mass were genuine clergymen. And then, there arose the great retaliation, if in the Church itself the rebels germinated, those who confused Christ with a slum worker, father of eight or ten children, drunk, drugged and with dirty feet, who got up and raped his wife and sent his children to work, and all that because he had no education, the same one that Peronism had taken

from him by putting aristocratic pretensions in him, or rather those of a middle-class citizen.
These were the ones who had staged the spectacle, which wasn't really a spectacle at all, because it was worse than a bomb in a school or a fire in a Buenos Aires church. It was a symbolic act that the extremists had perhaps planned for a long time. A catastrophe : the insubordinate and violent masses exacerbated to the point of bestiality. The sacrificial lamb was a middle-class boy from a conservative family, with no political background or religious activism, only the intellectual curiosity that had led them to travel the same route as the long procession, trapped in their car when it all began: the executions on the sides of the road, without questions, based solely on the appearance of their faces, the way they were dressed, the make of their car, and a brief, sententious word on the lips of those executed.
At ten o'clock at night, the Libertella twins lay side by side in separate beds in the same room. Their parents kept vigil in the waiting room, Leopoldo with a radio glued to his ear, listening to the news. Their mother paced back and forth between the room and the sidewalk to smoke.
In the early hours of the morning, there was a commotion at the door of the room and in the hallway leading to it. Nurses, on-call doctors, machines, and treatment carts were brought into the room. Álvaro's scream was heard clearly and loudly, all the way to the street where Grisel was. She ran inside, but Leopoldo blocked her path and held her close, restraining her, because she already knew what had happened.
His son is dead.
But no one could imagine her face when she entered the room.
God, or whatever beast it was, had taken Germán away again.

5

During the night, few paid attention to them. Explanations were left to the attending physicians: *anaphylactic shock* was the diagnosis recorded on the

death certificate. An unexpected and unpredictable reaction. All of this, of course, was covered by the consent form signed by the parents.
Leopoldo was furious, but his wife restrained him with her own anguish, which required his own restraint and comfort. He could not leave her alone to surrender to the shockwave of anger and impotence with which he blamed himself for his stupidity, his lack of foresight, for having fallen so low as to be caught in the traps of those who pretended to know more, who undoubtedly did know more, and that is why they had convinced him.
Grisel wept because it was her fault. She had insisted on going to the clinic until her husband finally gave up. If they had gone to the hospital, if she had listened to him, who had more street smarts, if she hadn't left Germán alone—but no, that had been the other one, but this one, like the other… both had died because of her. One because of her maternal negligence, the other because of her irrational worry. Sobbing uncontrollably, clutching her husband's shirt in terror, almost tearing the buttons, soaking the hair on Leopoldo's heaving chest with her tears, she told herself she didn't know how to love. She, the mother, didn't know how to love her children except by leading them to their deaths.
They had forgotten about Álvaro, who lay awake in his bed, watching them carry away his brother's body wrapped in a black zip-lock bag, and then remove the blood-soaked sheets and the mattress, filthy with secretions. Germán's blood, saliva, and urine, which they both mocked and boasted about, like any man revealing his body with bravado and pride, with shamelessness and without shame. And then, he observed the empty bed, the absence of the mattress he would miss and loathe for the rest of his life, to the point that he told himself, staring at the ceiling and the dirty window where his brother had written a vengeful message, that for the rest of his life he would find a way to repair and clean people's mattresses, removing the filth or destroying them if necessary.
Dr. Saravia had already said everything necessary, but even if he wanted to, other concerns consumed him that early morning. An injured boy had been brought in by ambulance, followed by several patrol cars. Despite their attempts to avoid drawing attention, they couldn't prevent the neighbors from waking up, unaware that Monday would soon dawn and the workday would impatiently call them back. Nevertheless, they came down from the apartment buildings or out of their houses in the surrounding

blocks. Wearing lab coats, t-shirts, and flip-flops, they crowded onto the sidewalk, asking questions and observing the unusual display of force, in which they suspected official movements.
They brought in the boy wounded in Luján, the victim of the mock sacrifice carried out by extremists on the altar of the Basilica. They had followed the events on the radio throughout Sunday, but despite the alarms, they didn't entirely believe it. A sacrifice in Luján? Weren't they speaking figuratively? Isn't the Catholic Mass, after all, the symbol of the Great Sacrifice where God offers his only Son to redeem the sins of the world? But the journalists had spoken of a pagan rite, the altar table like a sacrificial stone where a naked boy had been laid with his arms and legs tied in the shape of a cross, while the gold of the ornaments, raised high above the wall of the central nave, simulated with its reflections the flames of an ancient and divine fire. Isn't that the meaning of the Church's gold? The Vatican's treasures do not tremble with sorrow, nor do they melt at high temperatures, but lie in cold, temperature-regulated basements to preserve the paintings, statues, and ingots under the protection of alarms and weapons.
The Vatican army is also an army.

The injured boy was nine years old, they said. He had been taken to the Saravia Clinic because of its owner's great prestige and, of course, his connections with the general who had taken charge of containing the unrest in Luján. The ringleaders had been eliminated, he made sure to clarify the next day at a press conference held at the Government House, alongside the de facto president. Those responsible, disguised as priests, were executed. But word got around that there were real priests, leftist priests, priests from poor neighborhoods and slums who were stirring up the discontented crowds. They, too, had to be eliminated.
The Church issued a manifesto in the Metropolitan Cathedral, read by Archbishop Macabeo Magallanes, appointed by the Pope, and yet everyone knew the government's contentment. The Pope and his peace interventions in the conflict with Chile, repeated time and again throughout the century, and later with England over the South Atlantic islands, and with Paraguay, which always resentfully claimed responsibility for old struggles, and the conflict with Brazil due to Uruguayan betrayals. These official pronouncements seeped into the Argentine psyche, forming a foundation upon which the stunted and outlandish institutional buildings were

constructed: laws, regulations, decrees, state highways like immense asphalt deserts, monumental shopping malls filled with people wandering through empty stores as if in abandoned museums, and the mysterious warehouses of modern architecture whose purpose was unknown: high ceilings and hangars with airplanes that, for now, did not exist. Until someone said—a somewhat deranged politician, perhaps, entrenched in his delusional sense of power and detachment from convention and what was considered acceptable—that they had brought ovens and refrigerators, large industrial machinery. And it was said, to counter the absurd insinuations of that doctor, who turned out to be named Farías, from the dissident branch of that family, of course, because the selflessness and dedication of the rest to the good of the nation were already well known, that all those facilities were the product of the industrial development that the economy had fostered since the current government took office. Leaving aside the political maneuvering, General Saravia said in that conference where he took advantage of Sunday's unrest to talk about everything he had kept hidden in his dark agenda, that the country was finally moving forward, ignoring the discontented and defying its opponents.
"The country is a battlefield," he concluded. And the applause agreed.

The stretcher was brought in between two rows of gendarmes, received by six stretcher bearers, two on each side and the others at the ends, shielding the boy from the camera flashes. Dawn was breaking, but the corridor to the operating room was a long stretch filled with strange voices and white phantoms: nurses with faces as pale as their aprons and doctors like white owls in black ties, their tongues perhaps, always so sarcastic, as infested as larval cocoons.

Behind them walked a blond man, thin, not very tall, with light but intense eyes. There was dried blood on his hands, as well as on his polo shirt and jeans. He was young, too young to be the boy's father, although who knows, anything's possible, they said among the rows of infiltrated neighbors, passing whispered messages from mouth to mouth to those waiting outside. All this commotion was a welcome break from the daily routine, where demonstrations and shootings had ceased to be dangerous novelties and had become news stories paraphrased on the radio.

Dr. Saravia stopped him, placing a hand on his chest, with a confidence that was really contempt. They probably didn't know each other, but each had heard of the other. Saravia had orders from the general, his father, and said to him:
-Krakovsky, go to the reception desk and fill out the forms like everyone else.
In the distance, the gendarmes held their rifles at the ready, clearly keeping a watchful eye on the stranger. For he was a stranger among them all: the blond man who looked remarkably like the boy on the stretcher who disappeared into the operating room cage. He even resembled a dying bird stoned by rowdy boys.
The victim of the attack had to be cared for, of course, by the state apparatus. The innocent scapegoat with whom the extremists had attempted a sarcastic parody of what they accused the de facto government of. In this unsubtle and tragically conceived manner, they hoped to awaken the conscience of the crowd, lulled to sleep by tear gas and their equally tearful pronouncements on the nefarious scourges of the left.
Germán's parents, standing before Álvaro's bedroom door, who could hear the voices, footsteps, and the creaking of the gurneys, were talking to the Pole, who had arrived a little while earlier, reproaching them between swallows of bitter saliva for not having warned him sooner, for not having sought the necessary help and advice, at least. But after feeling offended and looking with terror at those eyes that seemed to be forever lost to him, he turned away, just like them, when he heard the name Krakovsky on Saravia's lips. The Libertellas thought for a moment that they were calling for the Pole. The Pole thought they were looking for him in a rude manner. But when he turned around, he saw the little man whom the gendarmes seemed to be guarding at a distance, not a prisoner yet, but a suspect. Otherwise, why would the criminals have chosen that particular family? Victims are sometimes accomplices, and on occasion, more guilty than the perpetrators of the crime.
He stared at him intently. He couldn't tear his gaze away; his heart pounded, and for a moment he thought he was in an alternate reality: his body frozen in the familiar, unable to move, time stopped so his eyes could contemplate the figure of this Krakovsky, who was identical to the one who had always pursued him, leading him to the waters. He saw him lower his

head before Saravia's authority, who, nervous, hurried toward the operating room doors, which opened quickly; then the man walked to the counter, where the secretary, probably more frightened than he was, was taking notes, filling out the form.

The boy's name was Agustín, and the man was his maternal uncle. His parents had died on the pilgrimage. Now he was his nephew's guardian. And his name was Ariel Krakovsky, he said, with a voice that seemed to have traveled several generations to arrive at that exact moment, and the accent was Polish, obviously. As if he had just arrived at the port of Buenos Aires, after having sailed on the stormy waves of time. But it wasn't the smell of salt water that the Pole now smelled, but the sweet bitterness of a river.

He approached his namesake, and even began the conversation with that nickname, because he couldn't think of any other way not just to break the ice, but to overcome the concrete wall of tragedies that had been rising around them all. But how could he do it without sounding ridiculous or trivial when so much was happening, to this man who had just lost part of his family, to the Libertellas who had lost one of their sons, and to himself who had lost a kindred spirit, one of his own, not by family or kinship, but by the very nature of his soul, to call it something, someone who, like him, had a kind of parallel soul, a *doppelganger* , perhaps.

And despite his apprehensions, and seeing that everyone was avoiding the man except the journalists who had already arrived at dawn with their vans and equipment, their cameras, cables and microphones, fighting with the police and soldiers who were trying to keep them at bay with threats and rifles at the front; but they kept shouting and asking questions, until one of them managed to sneak in and reach the uncle of the injured boy before the Pole could get close, he stood in front of him and asked a stupid question, which is the only reliable thing a journalist can ask when he doesn't know anything and you have to start somewhere.

The man stared, speechless, looking shy and confused, completely oblivious to the commotion, unable to penetrate the shell of gloom he had built around himself. Then the Pole tugged at the journalist's jacket sleeve and pushed him back. He acted authoritarian, and many must have thought he was an undercover agent, a well-disguised government representative. Neither composed nor desperate, his demeanor suited the situation,

perhaps due to his long experience with his *other self* , whom he was now helping to rid himself of the troublemakers (and helping him accomplish his mission, probably, that long-postponed goal he had been avoiding all his life).
"Thank you," the other man said, taking a handkerchief from his trouser pocket, wiping the sweat from his face, and blowing his nose. His eyes were as clear as his own.
"It's nothing, we all have problems here." He paused and extended his hand to greet him. "Look, to be honest, I couldn't help but overhear what you said to the secretary. I'm not asking about what happened in Luján, but about your name. I have the same name as you."
She looked at him in surprise, but after scrutinizing him with her eyes, she replied:
-We must be related, sir…
-Ariel Krakovsky.
Frowning, the other looked for somewhere to sit.
The Pole grabbed him by the shoulder, signaled to the Libertellas who were still sitting where the funeral home staff were asking them questions and filling out paperwork, and they went to a dining room with large pots of tall plants that looked like small palm trees, and there was a white counter.
"What would you like to drink?" the Pole asked.
The other one shrugged.
He ordered breakfast for the two of them.
"I imagine he hasn't eaten anything, and neither have I. I have a family friend who lost one of their children, that's why I'm here. The father is a great friend of mine, and well, I'm keeping them company, what can you do?"
The other man glanced at him from time to time, but his gaze wandered around the ceiling and walls, his hands caressed the tablecloth and tapped his fingers, and he blew his nose with his handkerchief, sometimes simply with his fingers, which he then wiped with a napkin. Everything was immaculate in that dining room. Some doctors who must have been finishing their shift were having breakfast peacefully, paying no attention to them or the shouting coming from the street. A radio, playing at a very low volume, broadcast news about the progress of the investigations.
-Excuse me, sir…

"Don't be so formal, my friend, we might be cousins. Where are you from?"
-From Buenos Aires, like all of us, he already knows about the Krakovskys, we have a reputation. But I never messed with them.
"I understand, the same thing happens to me. I have a mattress workshop, and they've even tried to mess with me; I've even received threats. But since I'm family, they left me alone. They're cousins, second cousins, nephews, brothers-in-law, and so on."
"I believe that you and I, judging by our resemblance, come from the same branch of the family, from the countess..."
There was the first link in the chain, the Pole said to himself.
-I heard about Countess Natacha, the one who died insane in Santa Fe...
-Yes, that's the branch we come from, less criminal but no less fatal.
-Why do you say that?
The Pole, accustomed to mate and absinthe at any hour, slowly sipped his coffee with milk, fighting back the nausea. He wanted to behave well in front of the other man, to project confidence.
"How should I know! Have you seen what happened to us? My sister, a Krakovsky, married an intellectual, a real writer like my brother-in-law, and a true-blue Argentinian, a real criollo at heart and well-educated in Europe. Nelson and I talked about everything; he was even teaching Agustín about free thought, covering both Nietzsche and Saint Augustine. We were talking about the latter in the car when we were attacked. We were on the road not on a pilgrimage, but just driving. But the windows were open, and they heard us. They'd been reporting some outrages on the radio, but we hadn't seen anything. We imagined the military must be up to their usual tricks, along with the left-wing militants. The Peronists, the radical radicals, the slum priests, all mixed together, even the anarchists, against the government. Damn it, cousin, if you'll allow me to call you that, excuse this flood of tears, I'm drowning, cousin..."
And he grabbed the Pole's hand, who let himself be held but felt that it wasn't a hand that was gripping him, but a hook or simply a rusty barbed wire. The Pole didn't see any double meaning in what the other was saying; perhaps the Pole was schizophrenic, but it was so similar to what he had been suffering all those years, that it was as if, faced with failure, the other was concentrating all his skills on this man in front of him to penetrate his

resistance with that hand, which in the end was nothing more than a human hand.
Now the other one was crying, without letting go, drying his tears with the sleeve of his other arm.
"Come on, cousin," the Pole said. "Don't get like that, everything will be alright, look, we met in this sea of people for a reason, right?"
The other man looked at him with cloudy eyes, as if observing him from the bottom of a river. The Pole couldn't bear it any longer; he stood up and patted him on the back. The other man, moved, shielded from the gloom and chaos that surrounded them, hugged him tightly, and the Pole felt himself soaked with his tears and snot, like a fifteen-year-old boy trapped in an adult's body. And then he kissed him on the cheek while still hugging him, as if he wanted to kill him with that kiss.

6

That afternoon the boy died. They carried him out of the operating room, covered with blood-stained sheets, onto a gurney that slid along with a creaking sound of inconsolable mourning, pushed by two orderlies on each side, two nurses at the front, and Dr. Saravia at the head of the deceased. Seen just like that, in that austere white corridor like a funeral parlor, they looked like they were carrying a white coffin; the four men on the sides were the undertakers, the women at the front were the nuns, and at the end the doctor resembled a priest in his white surplice attending a funeral service.

The boy's uncle stood watching the funeral procession pass by, his arms crossed, biting the nails on one hand. He wasn't crying, because he'd already been told not to, and besides, what hope was there? The world as he had known it was collapsing like a cathedral, and the only refuge was that white building with glass doors through which the living dead peered: the neighbors, the citizens, and the journalists, their eyes flashing with the camera flashes.

The Pole couldn't leave him alone amidst the flashing lights of the cameras that drifted in from outside, invasive like unwanted but necessary witnesses, which is why no one stopped them, not even the soldiers at the gates. The eye of a rifle is too small to absorb that radiant light that immortalizes moments. The eye of a rifle doesn't get along with it, itself capable of ending eternity in less than a second.

The Libertellas were still sitting in their armchair outside Álvaro's room, and when the unexpected procession had finished passing through the rather narrow hallway—so narrow, in fact, that they had to move their feet to let the stretcher and those carrying it through—Grisel stood up, still wiping the damp handkerchief from her face, and entered the room, almost feeling her way around the door. The Pole looked at the Italian and stopped to speak to him.

"Two boys in one day," said the twins' father. "That's what they're saying on the radio."

The Pole then saw the transistor radio, so small it could be hidden in the palm of his hand against his ear. He placed his hand on his friend's shoulder.

"I have to accompany the poor fellow," said the Pole. "He's half lost, and he's a relative after all."

-Go on, don't worry about us. If it weren't for Alvarito, I'd tell everyone to go to hell.

"Calm down, man, calm down. Look at that guy," he said, gesturing toward the boy's uncle, who was also whining like a child. "Everyone he's lost died, and he's acting just like a fifteen-year-old, don't you think?"

The Italian shrugged, put the radio to his ear and listened, raising his hand to tell the Pole to wait.

-The leftists planted their flag in Plaza Congreso...now they say the military is firing with everything they've got, the tanks...they're shooting...some guys on top of the statue...they shot at them, they knocked it down with people and everything.

The Italian man moved the radio away from his ear, but the intermittent sound of a military march, interrupted by gunfire and shouting voices, could still be heard.

-It's a war, Pole.

-That's right, Tano, like the ones our parents saw in Europe, or not so much yet, but it's just beginning.
The clinic's internal routine was not disrupted. Scheduled appointments were maintained, but few dared to approach that block crowded with journalists and other people. However, during the rest of the week, normalcy gradually returned, like those terminally ill patients who, shortly before death, experience a strange improvement .
The bodies of Germán Libertella and Agustín Morales were placed side by side in the morgue. On Tuesday, when the funeral home arrived to collect them, a lawyer arrived with his entire team to present an autopsy order issued by the judge.
Dr. Saravia read the order. He looked nervous.
-Please, gentlemen, come into my office.
The lawyer left his people guarding the bodies.
-My father, General Saravia, will file a complaint about this blunder, sir.
"As you wish, Doctor, but until you do, the bodies will remain here to ensure they aren't stolen. The forensic team will arrive first thing tomorrow."
"It's a disgrace, sir," Saravia said, more nervous than he'd ever been seen. His guardian angel and father seemed to have abandoned him. Tall and thin, with dark hair and a beard that hadn't been shaved for almost a week, his eyes tired after sleepless nights and three lengthy surgeries, he looked like a broken Christ, a Jew dishonored by his peers. That's how the cartoons in the press portrayed him in the following weeks, and even more obscenely in the graffiti on the walls of the streets and sidewalks of Villa Luro.
Throughout the week, riots raged in Congress and Plaza de Mayo, and in the outlying neighborhoods, barricades with red flags were erected, justifying the massacre perpetrated by the military. Bombs were set off in factories that had shut down and been set up in rebellion against military orders, because that's what the government, or rather the State, had become: a barracks waging an ideological war to cover up what was happening beneath the surface. The dead children were suddenly hailed as martyrs on banners, flags, and in the cries of the combatants. Whether they were left-wing, centrist, or right-wing didn't matter as much as the fact of their deaths. Everything serves to inflame passions and unleash the pack.

In Congress, functioning as diametrically opposed as it had for years, sessions were held to discuss whether or not to allow an investigation into the alleged acts denounced by the left. "They were sent from Russia," the military said, "they're keeping us here to resist, to stop the country's progress."

It had been said in the press and on the street that the rumors were true, but no one was surprised. Why then were the leftists raising such a fuss now, over just two kids, when so many thousands of others had already disappeared from the scene?

Disputes erupted between the judiciary and the executive branches. What one demanded, the other vetoed with a decree. Behind it all, weapons were at the forefront, and each refusal was followed by new clashes in the streets of Buenos Aires.

The Tablada and El Palomar barracks were closed and prepared for war. General Paz Avenue became a barrier few could breach. Leftists, however , were gaining followers among those who had remained neutral but who, faced with this onslaught, erupted in anger at being deprived of certain privileges: the position and support they had lent to the system. Some businessmen switched sides, many intellectuals spoke out in the press in favor of the courts that wanted to investigate. Not so my father, Castel Beltrame, who continued to dodge bullets like a swan sailing gracefully on turbulent waters.

Then the raids began. The first was at the Saravia Clinic. I don't know what was going through the doctor's mind, whether he was intelligent or a simpleton, as they say, whether he was a puppet of his father or a fool who knew nothing but medicine and couldn't care less about everything else, as those who boasted of knowing him claimed. Aldo Saravia was married, but to whom? The woman he'd been seen with at some academic dinners was one of those women no one remembers the next day. Was she pretty or ugly, young or old? Was she a professional like her husband, or a housewife? He had two children, that's true, but they were still very young. He'd married late, some said, because of his dedication to his career; others commented that his wife had had several miscarriages, some of them among the two surviving children.

The fact is that Aldo Saravia was nothing without his father's support, nor without the protection of his military brothers, even though they were

younger than him. The doctor was the brains of the family, and the others were the fire and the flesh. When everything came to light, only to fade away as quickly as if it had never been revealed, it was said—supposedly based on documents recording confessions, statements, interrogations, and more or less valid evidence—that Dr. Saravia was a kind of modern-day Frankenstein.

Some trials were held behind closed doors, which is why the leaked information was never reliable, due to both exaggeration and the trivial details that were leaked. The press portrayed Saravia as a cheap imitation of Mengele, with whom he was said to have had encounters at the clinic. For many years prior, the true whereabouts of Joseph Mengele had been unknown, and of course, Argentina was a haven for both those seeking refuge and those searching for them.

The system, appalling according to the media of that era who profited to the point of abuse from outdated recipes and standardized practices, was based on what could be compared to a neighborhood butcher shop. The very establishment, in such an anonymous location as the one where it had been opened, screamed this fact.

Where better to hide than among the sheep to catch the sheep?

The wolf in disguise, as he was later caricatured, had a thin, hairy body, like Saravia, a long, sharp scalpel in one hand and a saw in the other. His white smock barely covered his body hair, and it didn't conceal his small, laughable penis, which served to denigrate, incidentally , the weakling nature of his offspring. Why not exterminate the seed while he was at it, and avoid greater evils?

The children admitted to the clinic, mostly boys, but also boys and girls, were chosen based on their illness and its severity. The dying and terminally ill were not selected; instead, those in the best health were carefully sought out.

The demand was not for diseased organs.

Boys like Germán—perhaps there were many, but there was no way to determine which ones or how many. The case of Agustín Morales, whom the militants called a “martyr,” had followed the same path, but Dr. Saravia, perhaps out of habit or by turning a blind eye to what was coming, and covering his ears to the shouts of his father, the general, on the phone or the bombs and demonstrations in the street, tried to stick to his usual

routine. The performance of surgery in the theater of the operating room, the body's sutures properly covered and wrapped with bandages, the bloodstains in the right places, the anatomy altered so that not even the parents dared to look at or properly recognize their own children.
Dr. Aldo Saravia was an artist, and he was proud to be one.
That's what we assume, and I'm not the only one who's come to that conclusion. When it was all over, and the clinic was finally closed, he became depressed like an artist, not like a cold, calculating man of science. He raised his two children as an absent presence, and his wife, whatever the circumstances, sank into the nightmares of psychotropic drugs. He, it was said, would sit in the afternoons in the patio of the house in Vicente López that they were able to keep for a while thanks to his father's influence. Later, they moved several times to different areas when his work as a doctor was no longer profitable, like a hunter who changes location when his prey runs out. Downcast by the weight of his height, he went from neighborhood to neighborhood until he ended up back in the one he had had to flee like a criminal.
Near the closed clinic, where the signs with the name were still visible on the front, the father, mother, and their two boys rented a one-story house. One was older, and did nothing but wander the streets; the other, named Ignacio, died very young, murdered, they say.
Getting back to the point, the raid was ordered by Judge Dávila, an upright man, they said, a man independent of political and military power. There were still some, apparently, but like everyone else, time would take care of them, either themselves or their descendants, as happened with the judge. But enough of these digressions, for God's sake, the threads of the plot are getting tangled up and one can no longer tell which is which around the Gordian knot.
The police arrived escorting the judge and prosecutors. The capital's police were embroiled in a major conflict with the government forces. Disobedient, they reveled in provoking them, their sole aim being to prevent them from taking the lion's share. Something had to be done to stop them and make them share the spoils; that was the prevailing opinion on the street. It was a Friday night, a propitious day to launch a full-scale attack, taking advantage of the weekend break. Things are easier to cover up on Saturday or Sunday, for reasons unknown: laziness is necessary,

forgetfulness a pleasure trip, blindness a stay in a motel from which we emerge like newborn babies.

There's no sarcasm in that, just as there wasn't in what was later described as "the mousetrap of the Creole Frankenstein." I would rather say, as my old man announced one day when he dared to tackle the subject, because Ansaldi gave him permission and Gonzaga his approval, both happy to finally attack the power of General Saravia, even if only temporarily, in an editorial that was much talked about both for its courage, depending on the point of view, of course, and for the quality of the narrative (the writer had returned for a while, because that was what was needed for that article, the poetically evocative tone of the long-forgotten and intimidated morality), it was more accurate to call him a "sorcerer's apprentice" or, simply, a Mengeleian disciple. Somewhere the old man was, almost certainly in some house in Buenos Aires, putting on airs of a forgotten teacher or university professor with a meager pension, complaining about all that with his German accent in the corner store, or in the butcher shop, while reminiscing about his old days as he watched the knife being sharpened behind the counter.

They called them experiments, but it was, and still is—though I can't confirm it, and despite my own convenient ignorance—an invaluable trade that would never cease to grow and expand. The Krakovskys knew this very well; they ran the contraband trade in Buenos Aires and its surrounding suburbs in the old-fashioned, artisanal, and, in a way, bizarre manner by today's standards. They relied on traditional weapons, old-fashioned threats, and word-of-mouth propaganda, when their organization faced an immeasurably greater power: the might of machine guns and tanks used relentlessly, and the money that flowed back and forth along international routes accessible only to major corporations. But the Krakovskys, stubborn as can be, obstinate like bearded, hairy-chested men, determined to get their hands on a woman they'd set their sights on, or to seize a wad of cash they'd secretly spotted in a desk drawer at a freight company, for example, or perhaps simply driven by their wounded honor and their unwavering frustration at being destroyed, all agreed to denounce the military for what they themselves would likely do later, but couldn't yet because of those lingering Catholic beliefs they retained from old Europe. Their business was drugs, on a small and medium scale, secondhand weapons, and

brothels, which were increasingly lucrative. The patriarch Ezequiel was the boss, but above him was Senator Krakovsky, who protected his clan from Congress, pulled the strings of the laws that suited them, and didn't back down in the face of the military. This time he stayed out of it, at least outwardly, letting his family's bad reputation serve as a front for what he was plotting: first, exposing the organ trafficking operation hidden at the Saravia Clinic under the general's auspices and with the government's support; second, gaining advantages for his family's businesses. The Krakovskys were experts at filling empty spaces, like immigrants in general. An empty chair and uncultivated land were tacit permissions that Argentinians, in their Latin laziness, or whatever it was, never understood. Whether Judge Dávila was his accomplice, we don't know for sure. Much later, the judge's son and grandson were involved in strange affairs with criminals and disappearances, and whether the judge acted with good intentions or with ulterior motives, who knows, because there were journalists who harassed his family because of their trips to Salta and the border. A family of provincial leaders, in the end, the smuggling of anything negotiable vanished into the uncertain borders where Argentine history is generous.

The raid took place on Friday and lasted until nearly 3:00 a.m. Police officers smashed the glass doors, which shattered into shards that could have injured the few people waiting in the waiting room. Some were taken as witnesses, others were thrown out into the street. Secretaries were watched to prevent them from touching a single piece of paper on their desks, nurses were forced to stay in the patients' rooms, and the doctors on duty were handcuffed in a room. Soldiers broke the locks on interior doors secured with padlocks or keys, leading to rooms that were either stripped or filled with unusable machinery, trash cans, and pathological material. One after another, the doors were opened or forced open, while the judge's assistants photographed and took meticulous notes, examining the labels on the bottles and red bags piled up in these rooms or in rooms adjacent to where a recently operated patient or a dying person lay. Wearing gloves, they moved, shifted, and cleared the spaces to make room for more bags. They all smelled bad: these were probably the rooms where disposable waste was piled up, things that would never be used: body fragments,

gangrenous limbs, broken bones, cirrhotic livers, collapsed lungs, withered brains, crushed skulls.
What wouldn't sell.
What the garbage collectors would pick up from the sidewalks by the curb at night, or the beggars, or the madmen, or the dogs, because they all look alike when hunger and horror wreak havoc on the soul, when cold and loneliness envelop them in a hurricane-like circuit from which there is no return.
Then they arrived at the operating room.
First, a not very large room with the usual facilities: a stretcher, lights with arms hanging from the ceiling, nursing carts, instrument boxes, heart monitors, and trash cans, always abundant, because the body, it seems, insists on discarding more than it creates during its lifetime, until the final result is absolute zero, but nothing more than the harmonious symbol of a counter that marks an indecipherable negative amount.

Then, behind it, the metal doors led to the other operating rooms, small rooms on either side of a corridor like something out of an old hotel—what must have remained of the building where the clinic had been set up. In each room there was a gurney, a warehouse light hanging from the ceiling, and an old, rusty box of surgical instruments that looked more like a hardware store toolbox. Electrician's pliers, hammers, chisels, gouges, saws, and handsaws. And many buckets of formaldehyde. And rubber gloves lying on the floor, and the smell of old, dried grease.
The judge's secretaries flinched and covered their faces, successfully suppressing nausea. They distributed face masks. Dr. Saravia wasn't there that night; he would be arrested at his home, so a prosecutor sought out one of the on-call doctors to guide them on the names of the instruments found. The man knew more than he let on, which is why he answered reluctantly. His impeccably white scrubs contrasted sharply with the dirt under his fingernails. "What have you been doing?" the judge asked him. "Digging around in your mother's cunt," he replied. He wasn't a doctor, certainly not. They don't answer like that; they aren't so rude, but they can be more twisted than other men. They took him outside and drove him away in a patrol car.
They returned to the offices. The secretaries, only two at that hour, guarded the metal filing cabinets like two prison guards, one thin and very

pretty, the other fat and old, on either side of the shelves, filing cabinets, racks and desk, all together in a room characterized by the smell of dampness, the walls and ceiling with green stains and the flies that had taken refuge there, scared away by the formaldehyde.
They were made to open the locked drawers. They obeyed reluctantly, the thin one frightened, the heavy one angry. The highest files were unreachable, and one of the secretaries climbed onto a chair and opened them with the key he was given. There was no order or classification; the letters on the filing cabinets were mere distractions to mislead the curious. Anyone looking for a patient's name without authorization would need a great deal of time and energy, wasting it page by page. Because everything was, most likely, constructed with a code invented by Dr. Saravia and memorized by the secretaries in fragments, each representing a partial number. The only real evidence that could condemn Saravia and all of them were those medical records, with illegible handwriting and sometimes invented nomenclature.
Everything was packed up and loaded into the prosecutor's and police vans. Mountains of old and new paperwork, operating room instruments, and red and black body bags. At three in the morning, the investigation was over, the staff arrested, the witnesses taken to the police station to give statements, and the people on the street went to sleep after that spectacle they were used to seeing from time to time, when the court vultures decided to behave like official vultures.

7

During all that time, the Libertellas went back and forth between their house and the clinic. Leopoldo didn't open the business; he just tried to catch up on pending work, which in turn served to distract him from the bitterness that overwhelmed him, while she stayed at the clinic almost all day.

After the raid, the inmates were evaluated by a committee of doctors appointed by the court. Some were transferred to other facilities; Álvaro was discharged and taken home. He stayed in his room without going out or even glancing at the backyard or the sidewalk. Germán's bed was still there, as were his clothes in the closet, and a pair of underwear and a sock lying on the floor. He picked up the sock and played with it between his fingers, like when they were little and played with puppets, making up stories.

Where would the other member of the pair be?

Like them, he would surely never find her again. A common, domestic symbol of what had happened to the twins. He thought of the dead baby, the first Germán, and of that story his brother had tried to explain to him a couple of times, giving up out of shame for being considered crazy. Well, he had gone with the other one, or the other one had come looking for him. And then who was he, Álvaro? If until then he had considered his identity as part of a whole, as half of a set, what was left of him without that half? The truth was that he had never seen himself as an entity, or a unit, without Germán. The other one necessarily complemented him: he was the white or the black by which the other stood out. In that difference of character lay the unity, the two ends of a ring, where one ended the other began. And the best part of all was not knowing exactly, not even they themselves, the precise boundaries.

He listened to the train go by, lost in the noise that filled the room and shielded him from his parents' voices, whether they were complaining, arguing, or crying. The only sound that began to rescue him during the months he refused to go to school and the following summer was the hum of his father's workshop machinery. The train and the mattress-sewing machine, different yet both with the syncopated rhythm of an inner music that lulled him to sleep, transporting him to a kind of private paradise: the Polish man's workshop where he had spent so many afternoons waiting for his father to leave so he could go home, doing his homework at the office desk while the Polish man strolled among the seamstresses' tables. Only now did he realize that the two brothers had almost never been in the workshop at the same time . One or the other would take turns, in a sort of substitutionary role. He even fantasized, on occasions when he fought with

Germán, that when he was alone, the other didn't exist, had never existed, except as a counterpart invented by his mind.
Had the same thing happened to Germán? He never asked himself that question because he knew his mother's obsession with the first Germán had overwhelmed his brother. He probably thought of the other one when he saw him awake at night, staring out the window at the patio overlooking the train tracks, or talking to himself and getting up to open or close his bedroom door. Were there three of them, then? Álvaro wondered as he entered the workshop one day in February while his father was working, with the Polish man sitting and smoking, talking about lawyers and the lawsuit they had filed against the Saravias.
And he remembered the day Germán had almost cut his fingers off with the clippers. He'd never really known what happened, believing he'd gone half-mad and tried to kill himself. But hadn't he seen him talking to someone? When you talk to yourself, your gaze is lowered and introspective, but Germán always looked straight ahead or turned his head in fear. However, what remained etched in Álvaro's memory was seeing his own face, weeping in despair as he huddled in his father's arms. Was it him, Álvaro, doing that, or Germán? And what was Germán seeing in front of him, the other man or his reflection in a mirror?
Mathematics and algebra, as simple and logical as they had been taught in school, *the transitive property of equality.*

What to do with that knowledge? Did it serve to combat the sorrow, that something as impalpable as smoke that penetrates everywhere and obscures everything, that darkens and reduces everything to uncertain images that can be interpreted as a loved one or a monster?
But the music in the workshop softened the uncertainties and above all enveloped the afternoon hours in a reverie where he saw himself with a thick needle between his fingers, going up and down, penetrating the old leather or the hard fabric until he hurt himself, and the thought flowed from the mattresses full of dirty, complex and confusing remnants: deaths, deceptions, betrayals, violence and murder.
Like a witch, she had acquired the ability of clairvoyance. Psychosis or gift, in the end, it was all the same.
And so the mattress workshop became his private paradise, a center of the world's iniquities, which he explored like an obsessive anthropologist. He

reveled in evil, and his ill temper grew with him, his symbiosis with austerity and reserve, his friendship with the silence of words and his complicity with the noise of the machines. One day it would explode, the day of vendetta , a word he had heard from the Sicilian his father carried within him. He had heard it so many times since then that it became the blessed word born from the lettering he had seen drawn on the dirty window of the clinic, that lettering Germán had drawn before dying.
How do I know all this? Imagination is the only place where it is not possible to deceive oneself, and besides, Álvaro told me many of these things in a deliberate disorder, always distrusting me, whom he liked to call *illustrious raven* .
After a while, my old man stopped scolding me for visiting the Libertellas. I was a grown teenager who'd send me packing downtown and to the brothels in Constitución every weekend. Once, I took Álvaro. It was downtown, a few blocks from the Obelisk. We were as horny as the symbol of Buenos Aires, I think, because we searched and searched, wandering around Hipólito Yrigoyen or Bernardo de Irigoyen—I can't remember which president it was, nobody cared anymore. A dive with dark hallways, narrow stairs, a balcony overlooking the narrow street, no curtains, an old bed, and a creaking mattress. Already naked and with the girl of the moment, whom we took turns fucking everywhere, I saw him several times indulge in the vice he was already learning from his old man: diagnosing, by feeling, the surface of the mattress. The whore laughed, I let her do it because in a way I admired her composure, that unstable balance she had achieved after Germán's death.
We each came three times, and I went into the bathroom to pee. A cockroach got in the way, so I started getting dressed, and Álvaro came in. He considered the possibility of washing his penis with the water from the rusty faucet in the sink and decided against it. At two in the morning, we walked along Nueve de Julio until we found a seedy little bar that was still open. It couldn't have been much different when it was closed, because inside there was nobody but a guy behind the counter, with a crooked face, constantly putting his hand down his pants except when he took it out to bring us the beer bottles.
-What did I tell you, Alvarito? That girl's a real idiot, isn't she?
-Used to tough rides, for sure.

-Better, man, that way it's not hard to get in.
We weren't laughing; we were talking without looking at each other. The street was a tomb, and the city a cemetery.
"You still hold a grudge against me, Alvarito," I said without thinking. At that time of night, resentment flows like from overflowing sewers.
He looked at me, nodding.
-A call from your old man would have saved him.
He was right, of course, it was the same thing that had remained stuck in the sewers of my mind.
"But I didn't say anything to him," I replied, turning the empty jug upside down, pretending to break it. "I was scared..."
-That?
I shrugged.
-I owe him favors, I suppose.
-My family owed them money, in that case, it wasn't your responsibility to pay them anything.
I looked him in the face and I think he understood me, even though he didn't admit it.
Men like my old man are tough nuts to crack. They use the law like armor.
-And underneath they have nothing.
Yes, Álvaro was a seamstress's workshop fortune teller.
-We've got shit, dear. The armor is impenetrable and deadly.
-I already told you, Bautista. You're a crow that will grow up to be worthy of your name. Pecking away, you'll make your way.
We didn't speak again that night, and I think I only saw him a couple more times on the street, exchanging a cold greeting. His neighborhood wasn't my neighborhood.

While Álvaro spent his adolescence and youth learning his father's trade, I learned the discipline of writing from mine. The silence of the library was as natural to me as the noise of the textile workshop was to Álvaro. When I finished Pellegrini High School, I had to choose a major, of course from the few options my father gave me. I chose Philosophy and Literature, although he would have preferred Diplomacy or Law. In any case, I was in his environment, and he had the means to support me financially.

One night, when I got home from prom around four or five in the morning, he was waiting up for me. On the sofa, in his pajama pants and shirtless, he was smoking and drinking a mild liquor that kept him awake without getting him drunk. On the radio, a Bruckner symphony was playing, with those long phrases that thrilled him. When he saw me walking in, unsteady and with dark circles under my eyes, he said:
-Come on, sit down, I'll make you coffee.
I checked the time.
-I want to go to sleep.
-After…
He grabbed my shoulders, took off my tie and suit. He went to the kitchen, I smelled the coffee, and I was already half asleep when he came back and put the cup under my nose.
"Now that you're a man," he said with obvious sarcasm, "tell me if you've decided yet."
I told him then that I wanted to be a writer.
"A writer is born, my dear. Writing isn't a choice, it's done out of necessity. But I understand what you mean; I've seen you reading a lot these past few years, and I've read some of your work. I know, I know," he interrupted, "I checked your desk. So what do you expect? With the leftist buddies you've made, how could I not know what my son's getting into or what he's thinking? We all have ideals when we're young, but when we're old, reality is the only truth."
She burst out laughing after that date, which was so contrary to her social position.
"The old man is right, it seems," I told him.
"Sometimes, man, like everyone else. But dear..." Dad came closer, caressed my face like he hadn't done in a long time, but this time, instead of finding soft skin, he touched a day's worth of stubble. "I like your style, dear, you use a strange kind of poetry in your writing. You're not going to win anything, but that can be fixed."
-And what about when you're not here?
It was the first time I had thought about my father's death; both he and his work seemed eternal.

"That's easily fixed. You just start a journal and write about reality, or about how it should be for you. It's as fictional as literature, Bautista. It won't cost you anything."

My old man was right. Typing on a typewriter to create or annihilate worlds became as easy and necessary to me as breathing.

We were invited to an Air Force exhibition at Morón Air Base. I say "we" because Dad had started taking me to his meetings, conferences, and parties that were worth attending, he said, to introduce me to the right circles. The Academy of Letters, the Journalists' Circle, the countless gatherings at the Tortoni after the legislators left, and the teas at Harrods with the English businessmen. My father spoke to them as if they were native speakers, in addition to French, and I, at eighteen, felt self-conscious, dodging the leering glances of the young men in formal attire, too clean-shaven, too handsome to be desirable. I did, however, like the waitresses at the English establishment, their primness, their warm seriousness, as if those hands that served the butter in curls onto the plate were made of the same material.

But on the occasion I'm referring to, I was already in my early twenties, and I had a book of essays about to be published where I was trying to talk, perhaps a bit too ideologically, about the confrontation between the state and individuals. My father expressed his misgivings, but he told me: “Just throw the bone to the dogs. When you see which ones eat it, you'll know a lot more than you do now. With each book, Bautista, you advance in your understanding of humankind.”

The event was on a Saturday afternoon. The airfield and runways were enormous and seemed to stretch on forever. Some planes were dilapidated and used as museum pieces, while the rest were new and of all sizes; there were even two brand-new Hercules aircraft. The airshow wasn't open to the public, but rather for military personnel and their civilian guests. My father was talking to so many people I didn't know that after an hour he gave up trying to introduce me to each one. I told him I was going to take a walk around.

I walked along the flagstone paths, then the dirt paths, and finally across the grass. The Saturday sun beat down on the desolate countryside, where the hangars stood far away and the airplanes gleamed like pieces of metal fallen from the sky. Airplanes that had crashed long ago, like ships sunk

centuries before. The murky water was an immediate counterpoint to the silvery, shimmering reflection of the sun on the planes. I thought about the Pole and his ghost. What had become of him, I wondered? The Libertellas were still running their business , the mother now too mad to do anything but stay home, sewing and humming made-up songs in which she mixed the names of her dead children (always the same, single name, of course). The father was in the workshop, training Álvaro. The Pole, I learned, had sold his business, which was now a market, where sewing machines had once stood, now there were gondolas. The other Ariel Krakovsky, Agustín's uncle, had become known for his fiery speeches in opposition newspapers, his constant refrain being to demand justice for the death of his family, which, in the end, had been committed by the very clan he gradually joined as his furious pursuit of justice intensified. What the Krakovsky clan had done in Luján had been a necessary act to expose the government's crimes to the world.

None of this was ever proven. The Saravia Clinic was closed for good, but the trial for malpractice and organ trafficking dragged on for years. A decree finally brought the stalled investigations to a halt. However, the Krakovskys, among whom were a couple of skilled left-leaning lawyers, claimed to have the codes to decipher the account books found in Villa Luro. They didn't reveal them, of course, but they asserted that the books contained the names of foreign businessmen and politicians, as well as bank transfers involving a London bank and Brazilian politicians. Much was already known about the Goncalves family, but they were untouchable, with their wealth in Minas Gerais and their well-established funeral businesses. They manufactured the finest coffins in the world, so beautiful that one couldn't resist resting in them for eternity, and with this advertising in Sunday magazines, they continued to add money to their coffers and subsidize wars. The Korean War, for example, had received mountains of ships from Brazil.

But what caught my attention now were the hangars at the airbase. They were empty. Of course, the planes had been brought out for the air show, but what struck me was the smoke billowing from the chimneys. There was no one in the largest hangar I entered, where the echo of my shoes reverberated from the asphalt. I walked with my hands behind my back, as if exploring, almost whistling as I gazed at the ceiling of scaffolding, steel,

and sheet metal. The lights were off, but the afternoon sun streamed through the openings. And suddenly, I saw the long rows of metal along the back walls.

The roar of the engines startled me. The planes had begun their display flight, but none of it appealed to me. They were like acrobatic pilots in a circus, their aim not to entertain anyone but to elicit admiration for the power displayed in each swift maneuver.

And they turned, crossing dangerously, creating pretentious artistic formations that mimicked, with precarious artifice, those of migratory birds. They squawked, the planes emitted strident bursts of heat sufficient to kill all those that came within reach of the turbines.

Inside the hangar, I walked toward the ovens. That's what they were —all the same, industrial, enormous, connected to each other, and with pipes leading to the chimneys. What were they for? For cooking, or burning.

I had been working at *La Prensa* for six months. A friend of my father's had gotten me the job. The *Krakovsky affair* , as it came to be known, was always open to new leads. State and private individuals—that was my interest at the time, the way they competed for profits. And the biggest stories always came from sources that couldn't be revealed because the law had to be ostensibly followed, and that's what the paperwork, the files, the lawyers, the notaries, and the judges who vouched for it were for.

The codes that the clinic secretaries had finally revealed (nothing was known about them, whether they were imprisoned or dead) showed addresses, numbers, and bank accounts belonging to a meatpacking company in Villa Devoto. During those years, I made my imaginative deductions, wrote hypotheses that I never published or showed to my father, because I was sure it would be like telling him nonsense, so familiar was it. He let me begin my journey into understanding the Argentine man, the Latin American man, by venturing into the hidden corners and basements that led beneath the rivers and under the sea, to legendary vaults filled with gold ingots. Imagination substitutes for reality, exaggerates it on many occasions, but almost always succeeds in constructing it.

Refrigeration units were sold abroad, not only to the coast, but also to Chile, Colombia, the United States, and England. The English had invested heavily in us, trusting in our lack of discernment. The bodies taken to

England, where the green fields were gardens invented by bucolic painters, served as an attraction for the types who saw Europe as a utopia in the name of a company that was a mixture of an open and ideologically flexible religious sect and an investment firm. A fatalistic mix where numbers promised salvation, and salvation promised rewards.
And the ovens at the launch fields.
I approached them as the planes drowned out the applause and cheers, while my old man must have been looking for me with a worried expression, unable to leave the stands set up for the officers.
They were all empty, clean, smelling of nothing but metal, as if they had just been bought, or in reality, cleaned a few days before. How many cadets were used to clean up day and night whatever had been burned? Did they know? Of course, but unwavering obedience was the foundation of a military force.
I went back outside, met up with my father, and patiently greeted all the uniformed officers, chatted conspiratorially about the country's fortunes, got in the car, gave the customary and cordial bow to the guard at the entrance, and headed towards Buenos Aires. And as I drove along Juan B. Justo Avenue and Dad smoked with the window open, I asked him, or rather, I said to him :
-My ass itches, old man.
"Scratch yourself," he replied, but I could read his thoughts in his eyes. "Nice metaphor of yours, literary type, to come and tell me you want to share your discovery."
-How do I manage to hold back?
I watched the street, the people crossing at the corner while we waited at the red light. A man with a walker crossed slowly while his little dog circled him, barking, as if announcing his presence, clearing the way for him, or protecting him.
-I'm not a moralist, old man.
-An intellectual is always a moralist, it depends on the morality you defend.
-Isn't there just one?
He laughed so hard he started coughing and threw his cigarette out the window. I already knew the cancer was beginning to suffocate him, but its path would be slow and often ignored.

He slapped me affectionately across the face, like I never remember him ever giving me.
"I'm already on the other side, Bauti, I can't give you an answer. You have to find it yourself, and anyway, my dear, we already know all the answers. The appeal of this charade we're caught up in is this pretense of not knowing anything, of believing ourselves innocent."
Suddenly, the old man and the dog stopped in the middle of the street, and the light turned green. I couldn't move, and the cars behind me blared their horns at full volume. I smiled at the old man through the windshield. I opened the door and got out of the car. People on the sidewalk stopped to watch us. The other drivers were cursing and shouting at me.
I picked up the little dog, a random mixed breed, brown with a short snout, wagging its tail happily. I helped the old man finish crossing; his gaze was lost, perhaps senile, as if he'd stopped not at a crosswalk but on a pier overlooking the sea. I took his arm and led him to the sidewalk, leaving the dog at his feet. I went back to the car, flipping the bird to the idiots who were booing me. The light had turned red again, so while we waited, my old man looked at me, lit another cigarette, and said nothing.
That was my last good deed, I think. And I would have started crying if I hadn't had to put it in first gear and move forward again in the middle of a street full of dead people staring.

8

The setback at the clinic had already gone through the usual phases of sociopolitical processes. First, the atrocity of the events; then their trivialization through the abuse of the media that reported them; then the distortion of official interpretations; and finally, the use of these interpretations as arguments by the opposition. Finally, there was the formation of oblivion, which, like a scar, slowly but surely spread over each of the wounds inflicted upon constitutional dignity.

It wasn't so much the ignominy of perverted human values, as my old man said in one of his articles—his most controversial one—in which he laid bare his most piercing, critical, and independent gaze, as far as he could, of course. Because, as I've already said, we Beltrames are survivalists, neither scavengers nor predators; we simply pick up the speck from someone else's eye and pile it up with our illustrious crow's beaks in our library, in a section dedicated to the study of humankind. And over the years, tight nests have formed on the shelves, impossible to dismantle without risking their destruction, because iniquities cannot be taken apart to study them under a microscope; they only accept eternal darkness in solitude or the burning of their straw hearts.

It wasn't so much the perversion of morality, whatever it might be, but rather the disruption of the imperturbability of institutions, which the government—like any weak government supported by force and obstinate in maintaining sociopolitical fallacies at all costs—could not allow in the society it led. The atrocities at the clinic were rebranded as exaggerations by opposition media, supported by foreign powers, to intimidate and undermine the national character. Laughable or not, these contradictions achieve their objective by confusing their intended audience, especially public opinion. We Argentinians are expert embezzlers, and we have learned not from world history, since we gain little from what we read, and even less from what we hear, but from the experience of playing the game on the field. That's why we love football so much: that asynchronicity of time, that fallacy of truth and lies constructed on the pitch, each play a strategy invented by soldiers running in their own world, accomplices and victims of their teammates, exiles from reason, succumbing in the passionate march after a ball that is like a world slipping away, both shield and weapon, perhaps the cannonball to pierce the enemy's arcane heart. There is more hypocrisy and intelligence in a football match than in a battle.

After the speeches, the explanations, and the interpretations, the investigation and subsequent trial came to nothing. I already mentioned the path taken by Dr. Saravia. As for his family, everything remained the same: the general unscathed, with his dog-like face ready to bite the hand that reached out, watching over his other three military sons whose careers he was supposed to protect.

That happened years ago, and the Krakovskys continued to be an emblem of social rather than political opposition, using violent means to overthrow what they called the all-consuming power of the day, which perpetuated itself in the presidential palace, with ups and downs, yes, but also with recalcitrant and powerful persistence. For the government, they began to be seen as left-wing extremists who received support—and it was certainly true—from Russia and the socialist countries. In this way, the resistance that began with the leadership of smuggling in a neighborhood and then in a city, spread throughout the country, connecting the dots in a similar way to how they had formed in the interior, with Dávila in Salta, for example, or the Ponce family in Formosa, with a network of spiderwebs invisible to many, yet so strong that they became chains like those used in metalworking, which in the hands of men can shape a wheel as well as a weapon. Perhaps General Saravia told himself, reflecting on the remnants of Jewish vicissitudes that bothered him so much and from which he could never completely escape, that in the primordial spark, the first human discovery, self-destruction already lurks.

Years later, no more than ten, when I was alone in my father's house, my old man underground in a tomb in the Recoleta Cemetery, his body ravaged by cancer and cornered ever since by battalions of maggots; sitting at my father's desk, writing on his typewriter about coups d'état, about the nature of the armed forces, about the essence, in short, of the National Constitution, studying it as if it were the Bible, and which was, like the Bible, a copy of copies of copies, endless photochromes giving the illusion of novelty while we retained our deliberate and necessary naiveté. And we, those who call ourselves intellectuals, succumbed to the folly of exploring a hornets' nest.

One Sunday afternoon, I heard on the radio, interrupting Mahler's symphony (Faust's lament of his impotence and iniquity, cut short by fire), the news of a Hercules plane crashing into the South Atlantic. I sat upright in the old rocking chair I, like my father, used to use to listen to music, my feet propped up on the desk, oblivious to onlookers, wary of others' mistakes. I turned up the volume to compensate for the announcer's atrocious modulation. A Hercules had crashed into the ocean an hour after taking off from the Falkland Islands. Its flight plan had begun in Ezeiza and made a stopover on the islands, at an airfield that was still rudimentary but

was usually used without incident to transport military equipment and personnel to the bases on East Falkland. The *Falkland Islanders* were simply men and women who wanted to be left alone, and the Argentine military supplies disrupted that harmony, which only served to provoke the British government. Between these two dilemmas, the *Falkland Islanders* lived between misfortune and the Damocles' sword of an impending war. I mention this because it's central to the issue. Argentine sovereignty was taken for granted by anyone who wished to exercise it, not by official pronouncements or international rulings. The British, on the other hand, possessed the right of conquest that had earned them such a bad reputation, whether their reasons were valid or not, but that was the reality. The Argentine government had its military outposts, as in Antarctica, but no population that was Argentine in its own right; at least, that's how it was considered at the time. Those of us who lived thousands of kilometers away on the continent were taught something else entirely: the foreign usurpation of a place nestled almost at the end of the world, practically in the middle of the ocean, so to speak, shrouded in fog that blanketed arid lands of cold and strange vegetation, coasts battered by the sea and teeming with rodents that watched intently from their burrows the coming and going of ships that often ran aground and the planes that flew overhead and sometimes, too, crashed, who knows why. The cannons could be easily hidden among the tall thistles, and the rifles were like abandoned skeletons on the plains.

The plane had been on East Falkland delivering supplies for the soldiers, who, according to regulations, rotated every six months, but who were always the same men in reality—solitary types who fueled the resentment sown on the mainland. A routine flight, they said, every few months and without a fixed date. The official report offered nothing as certain, other than the plane's crash more than a thousand kilometers north of the islands, at the 40th parallel.

I was on my way to London.

The initial official accounts focused on blaming the British. A downed plane was such a serious international event that it provided grounds for a justifiable war. The government saw this as a golden opportunity to counter the corruption allegations and the growing opposition resistance that was ushering in a new period of somewhat unstable democracy. If the Military

Junta demonstrated patriotism in the face of this affront to national sovereignty, popular support would be unwavering.
Official statements and diplomatic meetings followed one after another, but London maintained a discreet silence compared to the military verbiage in Buenos Aires. Articles filled with jingoistic insults alternated with and viciously attacked those calling for prudence and investigation. Discretion has never been a virtue when passions are inflamed, especially when those passions are exacerbated by interests that wish to remain ambiguous.
I continued working at *La Prensa* , but I was already feeling uncomfortable with the demands management placed on me: write about this or that, and then the list of items to develop. They treated me like a journalism student, even an inexperienced intern. I was the son of Castel Beltrame, damn it, the intellectual, the political economist, the prestigious lawyer, the renowned writer. One day, one of the many effeminate, snitching secretaries who swarm around newsrooms like hopping rats or flies with large ears, dumped a stack of papers on my desk, next to the typewriter.
"What the hell are you doing?" I said to him, when his load blocked the machine's carriage. "Go move out of here!"
He already knew me, and smiled condescendingly. He was the boss's, obviously. I skimmed a few lines. It was about the plane crash. I dropped what I was doing and started reading. It was a whole list of preconceived ideas I had to put together for the following Sunday's special supplement. Well, it was better than just sitting back on the basics of the daily news. But this business of being given assignments, I was fed up. Meh, I told myself. That was my mood in those days and weeks after the Hercules crash.
I began to philosophize poetically, a piece of advice the old man had given me to relax and clear the ground where I should sow the seeds of creation. Hercules, I told myself, leaning back in my chair, lighting a cigarette, my feet on the desk, my gaze fixed on the ceiling of the *La Prensa building* , on the eighth floor above Avenida de Mayo. I imagined the cold waters of the South Atlantic and the legendary mythological Hercules as a giant with the waters reaching his thighs, slowly advancing northeast. His torso bare and hairy, his hair long and his beard thick, his features clouded and weary, his arms battling the flight of the Furies that had descended upon him in the form of metallic flies, shooting annoying stings that caused him more

irritation than pain. And that is what the giant could not bear: the uncertainty of something so small that it cannot be crushed with certainty because it slips through his fingers. Suddenly, he succumbs. His legs weaken, and he doesn't understand what's happening to him. He, always so strong, so invincible, his muscles soften and fail him, and he falls to his knees in the ocean. The waters reach his shoulders, and yet he still flails at the air against the metallic Furies that peck at him from a distance, so many that they form squadrons around his head. Hercules thinks now of nothing but the woman who waits for him far away, weaving and unweaving hypotheses of life and death. He will never see her again. Hercules plunges his head into the water, and the song of the sirens that once seduced him to ecstasy returns in the mouths of the Fates.

I wasn't willing to disown my art. If I lacked Shakespearean lyricism, I aspired to the lofty Orwellian reflections that were wreaking havoc on contemporary literature. Too much to ask, even that, I won't deny. But a five-step ladder doesn't allow you to climb any higher once you reach the fifth step, whereas on others, who knows how high our ambition will take us?

I put down the "instructions" for the model kit and started rummaging through the trash of old newspapers, some only a few weeks, a few months old at most. The name of Nelson Morales, Agustín's father, had been repudiated by the pro-government press as that of a left-wing intellectual; the reason: his adherence to Augustinian theology, a socialism that wasn't atheist but was nonetheless affiliated with the doctrines of catechisms from poor neighborhoods and mutual aid societies. It was then that his brother-in-law, Ariel Krakovsky, decided to emerge from the shell he had built around himself to shield himself from the onslaught of the press and the government. The death of his nephew didn't seem to have been enough, or at least he must have thought that the boy's memory shouldn't be prostituted by the abuses of any ideology whatsoever. But when they attacked the work of his brother-in-law, whom he admired—the same man who had been his university classmate before marrying his sister—he emerged from hiding and published an undeniably accusatory and doubly revealing pamphlet. While exposing Dr. Saravia's crimes, it simultaneously subordinated him to the official regime's terrorism. He named names , stating everything his brother-in-law and almost every intellectual with

even a passing interest had known for a long time, perhaps since the 1930s when the military seized power with semi-constitutional legitimacy. But even before that, they had been overthrowing rivals, Yrigoyen and others. The ideological facades were terrifyingly accurate and effective, so much so that it was impossible to discern which mask had been ripped away with each revolution.

The Pole's namesake enjoyed his long months of fame. The Krakovskys protected him even when the man, now stronger and more robust, no longer resembled a frightened adolescent but a self-assured man who looked at himself in the full-length mirror and contemplated the growth of his limbs as much as the development of his ideas and convictions. Artemio Krakovsky, the deputy campaigning for the Senate, summoned him, but by then Ariel already wielded more influence than he did. They met in the lawyer's office, where he continued to defend lost causes because he was competing against a state too large for his influence. Many who knew they were doomed from the start came to see him, even those who had committed tax fraud or were being prosecuted for anarchist crimes. The descendants of Italians filled his office from seven in the morning until ten at night, among Poles, of course, and Russians whose origins were unclear —whether they were Russian or from some other small nation absorbed by the Soviet Union. The office was in the Monserrat neighborhood, in an almost colonial building whose windows overlooked the narrow, cobblestone sidewalk, its panes shattered countless times by the attacks it suffered. No one in the government, however, considered it important. Artemio Krakovsky was a pettifogger with a penchant for the law; he didn't carry a pistol, like so many others, and he knew how to fire anything other than words that almost no one understood, both because of their academic complexity and because of the Polish accent his entire family boasted about.

He made him sit down in the antique armchair, like all the furniture, one afternoon at seven, when it was already getting dark and the overcast sky of the Buenos Aires winter was a sticky mass of humidity that extended its fingers of fine rain through the window.

"Shall I close, doctor?" asked the secretary, a fifty-year-old woman, thin, still pretty, perhaps the congressman's lover.

-Do what you want, Mirta.

Mirta, accustomed to her boss's bad temper, considered the response almost a compliment compared to other times. She preferred the silence of watching him work, transcribing his manuscripts, correcting his schedule as best she could, because he made and unmade the timetables as he pleased. Sometimes, unexpectedly, he would rush off to Congress, leaving many people waiting who would return again and again, until one day they disappeared without anyone asking why.

-Go home, Mirta. I don't need you tonight.

-Okay, doctor. And what do I tell the people who are waiting? There are about ten of them...

Tell them to go to hell, Mirta. What do I care!

The doctor spoke without taking his eyes off the folder on his desk or his hand off the cigarette. The secretary left the office, closing the door gently, and the voices of protest were suddenly silenced.

"Do you realize, my friend?" he said to Ariel, sitting at the desk, but near the window where a sad, cool breeze drifted in. "Do you expect me to fix all your problems? You've even asked me to play matchmaker..."

A smile softened his face, covered in thick skin that had once been ruddy and smooth, but now bore a coarse, grizzled beard and pockmarks. His glasses perched on his nose, and whenever he looked up, the reflection bothered whoever was looking at him, like a kind of distraction with which he seemed to disarm his interlocutor.

"Why did you summon me, doctor?" Ariel asked.

-Look, buddy. We both know how things are going, and we do the same thing.

"I don't think so, doctor. You're seeking a seat in the Senate."

-And you're one in the cemetery.

-I'm getting away with it.

-And thanks to whom?

Ariel shrugged.

Don't look at the ceiling, because God lives so high up that he doesn't even notice when he steps on us. Let's not act like tough guys, because there are tougher dogs to fight here, my friend.

That's how he became the future senator's pet project. Dr. Krakovsky now had a concrete objective to lead, and his rhetoric was fueled by combative elements he had previously rejected as either prudish or cowardly—he had

to admit it. He allowed himself to be influenced by the Krakovskys from the slums who knew how to profit from drugs and brothels, but there was nothing else to do if he wanted to get into the Senate. Without him and his cronies, the power of the right wing would extend its sanctified sentence unchecked. But was he really as selfless as I portray him? No, he was also after money. A comfortable life should be enough for him at his age, and if he worked so hard and with such bitterness, it was because he loved his profession. Money for what? To buy the Senate seat, of course. The Krakovskys would go into the waiting room, pretend to wait, and wait—one or five hours—just like any other ordinary person. It was worth being in that colonial room with its high ceilings, with the wad of cash in your pocket or the necessary customs documents. Mirta knew which ones belonged to all those waiting, seated in armchairs or standing with their backs against the walls. Sometimes a child's cry broke the silence of coughs and murmurs, and the mother explained to the secretary that she had no one to leave him with, and impatiently clutched the child. Mirta turned a blind eye, even sometimes offering coffee or tea to the most patient of them all.

The Krakovskys loved the doctor's study more than seeing him speak in Congress, which functioned sporadically. But when they triumphed, democracy would take care of the senator. Anarchy is a contradictory feeling, I often told myself while reading those pamphlets Ariel wrote. Augustinian theodicy had become a seed of vengeance, slowly growing beneath the guise of justice and institutional order.

The *vendetta* resurfaced, the word the Pole had advised Germán to use to fight the *other* and keep him at bay. And the other can be anyone, after all, or all of them together.

9

The investigation into the Hercules crash was in the hands of the state. Delays were the defining feature of the matter for a long time. Theories about an English attack lost traction, and talk shifted to a technical or human error. The aircraft's wreckage was found scattered over many kilometers of the seabed, in countless pieces of all sizes and conditions, and many items could not be recovered, including the "black box" where the pilots' conversations and instrument panel data were supposedly recorded.

Diplomatic efforts calmed the initial patriotic fervor; no one looked forward to a war with the United Kingdom. So the British government sent professionals and underwater exploration equipment that we lacked. Fragments were recovered, but no human remains—impossible, of course, after so much time. The delay had served its purpose, some said, and Ariel wasn't the first to point this out. In fact, he didn't speak or appear in the press. The government attributed his absence to desertion from the battle he had been fighting alongside them, and the opposition maintained a worrying silence. It was suggested that the military had made him disappear. Under the protection of the Krakovskys, this last hypothesis seemed strange to me. While the military wasn't exactly known for the subtlety of its methods, it was incongruous that it would coincide with the plane bombing.

I went to interview Artemio Krakovsky, hoping to at least get some hints about Ariel's whereabouts. He received me in his studio after I had to make my way through the lines of people who always waited for the meager crumbs of his favors. The secretary served us coffee. I didn't have a photographer or recorder with me; I usually remembered conversations so precisely that people even accused me of making them up.

-The disappearance of the spiritual leader of the campaign is worrying, doctor.

- And what worries you, his silence or his disappearance?

"If it were just silence, it wouldn't concern you at all. After all, Agustín's uncle is your pet project. If he gave up, I wouldn't be surprised; the fight is too much for many, stronger than him. The disappearance, let's say, is more serious; if he was killed, it's strange that you haven't protested, given that you gained so much from him, that his tragedy drew crowds. Agustín Morales will not get justice."

The lawyer laughed heartily.
"You should be a politician, my friend. But hey, as a journalist you can lie knowingly and without getting held accountable, at least not too much. Changing newspapers solves the problem."
I waited for a response. He settled back in his armchair behind the desk.
"I know nothing, Beltrame, about the whereabouts of our friend. Write that down, instead of making things up."
The doubt sown was more effective, the congressman knew it. His party had obtained what it needed to force elections next year, and the lawyer had his Senate seat guaranteed.
I left the studio and returned to the newsroom. A winter afternoon on Avenida de Mayo, damp walls that seemed to drip tears of unease and weariness. I felt blocked, not by a lack of creative inspiration, but by the absence of purpose in my life. Alone in a large apartment where my father's shadow was everywhere, his voice teaching me about history, and his hoarse cough in time with the exhaled smoke from his cigarette as he spoke to me about literature or read a passage from one of his favorite Conrad novels. The sea flooded the apartment, the waves and their senselessness battling men until they exterminated them one by one.
The afternoon was dying in the offices. The typewriters gradually fell silent as the men left, and the sound of the elevator carried away the voices and human shadows. And the twilight of night entered through the window, fought by the white overhead lights, ossifying the air until it became a statue sitting with its feet on the desk, and the smoke from my cigarette was the only thing alive in this approaching night with distant car horns that came from the end of the street as if from hell.
I missed my father's voice. I turned on the radio. A Beethoven sonata, perhaps, or the *Moonlight Sonata* I heard played on Aunt Aurora's fingers when I was a boy. So full of sorrow, I escaped to the Libertella brothers' neighborhood. There, I felt my identity disguised, that I acted like someone else, that I resurrected contradictions in my mind that made me feel different. Did I perhaps despise my essence, my family, my heritage? I needed the contrast to understand myself, or to accept myself. The "*illustrious crow" thing* was Álvaro Libertella's inspiration, but it was Germán who had first seen me that way.
That night I decided to visit the Villa Luro neighborhood again.

I took the train, as I used to in those days. It was a weekday, I think a Wednesday, at the beginning of August, cold, damp, and rainy days, unlike July, when the cold tends to be dry and sunny, or misty without rain. The overcast sky above the tracks mirrored my teenage sadness, but now grime dripped from the interior walls of the carriage, and the smell of urine grew until it seeped into my memory like glue.
As soon as I got off at the station, I saw the back yard of the mattress store. I went up and down the pedestrian overpass over the tracks, crossed the grassy path that had so often been trodden by the dead-end street. On the corner, the door was open and I could hear the engine of the locomotives. I walked in without knocking; the counter was prematurely aged, there was a smell of glue and leather, and the smell of urine from the mattresses. I covered my nose for a second, in the complete darkness of the interior.
"What are you doing here?" said the voice from the doorway leading to the workshop. Neither a warning nor a welcome, just a routine greeting.
"Álvaro, my dear old friend. I missed you," I said.
We didn't hug properly. Álvaro was wearing a leather apron, and there was perspiration from his hairy body under his shirt.
He led me to the back. An old man was hammering thumbtacks into a piece of cardboard. Álvaro said:
-Dad, Bautista came.
I did not recognize Leopoldo Libertella in that old man who raised his blind gaze.
-He lost his sight a year ago; he'd been unwell for a while. The smell of glue, you know?
Yes, years and years with my eyes fixed on the surfaces where he spread the paste with spatulas, the contents of which I don't know. I went to greet him; he smiled when he recognized my voice. I shook his hand and squeezed his gnarled fingers.
-And your mother?
-She died five years ago. Better for her and for everyone, she was crazy, demented, whatever.
We sat down in the kitchen to drink some mate. In silence, I observed his body, muscular from carrying mattresses during those years.
"Didn't you get married?" I asked him.
"What do you mean?" he laughed.

"At least to warm the bed," I told him.
-That's what dogs are for, too. And as for prostitutes, they show up around here every night, like cats. Every now and then, one comes in.
We had regained our trust, especially now that we were adults. As kids, we competed for leadership of our trio—the twins and me. There was never a clear leader; our intelligences took turns. But now that Germán was gone, there seemed to be no reason for competition.
-And you, dude?
I shrugged.
"When mouths speak, love vanishes," I replied.
She slammed the oilcloth tablecloth on the table as if to affirm, the kettle almost tipped over. She stood up and patted my face.
-I missed you too, Bautista. I read you, you know? And I remember the conversations we had, and that fight, do you remember?
-Of course I remember. Do you want to talk about politics now?
-After what happened? There is no politics, only ideology. You can serve it without being a son of a bitch.
-And what are you doing?
I prepared my mate, sipped through the bombilla while watching him tap his fingers on the table to a socialist march.
-Whatever, Bautista. Of course you'd understand if I told you, but I don't trust you, dear.
-You're still the same, Álvaro.
"Look," he said, taking me by the arm and leading me to the window. The avenue was illuminated by mercury vapor lamps and the heavy traffic of those returning to the province. He pointed toward the block where the clinic was located. They were demolishing one side of it to build a supermarket.
If I were you, I would have moved a long time ago. It's a very sad sight.
"We fed on that, Bautista. The memory has a very bitter taste, but it's what kept us going."
-You or your parents?
-You're right. Me, dear.
I squeezed his arm with fear and anger.
-You're going to hurt yourself if you continue with that idea.
He burst out laughing.

"But what better incentive than old carrion, Bautista? Vendetta is a stronger feeling than death, my dear."
-I think they've already beaten you to it.
He frowned and asked:
-Are you referring to the Polish guy?
Then all the theories fell into place. It was a revelation that had been right in front of me, but I didn't want to see it.
-Actually, I was talking about Agustín Morales' uncle.
"Well, it doesn't matter which Krakovsky you're talking about, you didn't see them these past few years, but they became close friends, so much so that they lived together in the same Polish hovel for a while. They were so alike that people confused them, because they started sharing clothes and even the same haircut, and their blond beards had the same arrangement of gray hairs."

-But the other one disappeared…

Álvaro sat down again. He prepared two cold mates, and looked at me again.
"I figured that's why you came. I don't trust you, Bautista. I love you very much, you know that, I admire your intelligence, and I even respect your opinions. You have a shrewdness, my dear, that anyone would envy. An imagination beyond words. Your articles may be flawed by falsehoods, but they're not poetic."
-So what then?
"Poetry is dangerous, my dear. You can kill people with a typewriter, or like us, with homemade bombs."
A lump formed in my throat. I hadn't killed anyone yet. What about him? Mattresses were sewn and bombs were cooked in the workshop.
I wouldn't get anything more from Álvaro. I said goodbye, squeezing his hand after accepting one last mate. The kitchen light illuminated the shadow and the distant Sicilian song that the old man now recalled from his childhood.
" *Sleep, baby, sleep* ..." the song went. Old Leopoldo must have imagined Germán—which one of the two?—in his crib of parallel iron bars.

I walked along Rivadavia towards Liniers. I passed what had been the clinic, now partly a market selling vegetables, meat, and groceries. Crates

were stacked by the door, with people looking, lingering, or asking questions, and the smell of meat wafted from the back. I thought about the rooms where human bodies had been kept, the refrigerated boxes sent to Villa Devoto, and then to the hangars in Morón. It was just one of the many threads in the immense web of cobwebs that entangled the cities and towns. Killing a spider or even cleaning a room was nothing more than child's play.

The Polish man's workshop in Liniers had also disappeared, but not his building. The metal shutters were closed, the facade peeling, the sidewalk littered with papers and trash, where homeless people slept at night, while many others queued at the bus stops. I'd been told he still lived in the back, so I went into the long hallway, between high walls with cracks and vegetation sprouting between the exposed bricks. The rusty metal door had barred spikes through which I could see the place where the Polish man lived: a kitchen, a living room with a dining table, and a bedroom.

I clapped my hands. I heard the bark of a small dog, high-pitched but tired. I saw it limp down the hall toward the door, wagging its tail.

"Who is it?" a man said from the darkness. A light turned on, illuminating the night, which lay prostrate to feed the cockroaches of the place.

- Mr. Krakovsky, I am Bautista Beltrame, a friend of Álvaro and Germán.

He appeared through the doorless kitchen door. Short, hunched over, and aged. His eyes searched me suspiciously beneath his bushy eyebrows.

"I don't know if you remember me, Pole, if you'll allow me to call you that. It's been many years since we last saw each other, since the twins and I were children."

He nodded.

"I remember, I remember," he said, tapping his temple with his index finger more than necessary, as if stabbing himself with the memory or trying to destroy it, I don't know. "What do you want?"

Well, I didn't know what to answer. It's true that I was looking for something, but I didn't even know for sure what, and besides, the abrupt question caught me off guard.

-I was wandering around the old Polish neighborhood, and it occurred to me to visit him. I have fond memories of that time....

-Oh...yes?

I felt like laughing at our contrasts: his dry austerity and my hypocritical unctuousness.
-Well, I won't bother you any longer, perhaps another time. It was a pleasure meeting you…
I was already turning around when I heard the door creak, then the dog started sniffing at my shoes.
"He likes you," said the Pole. "Otherwise he would have bitten you already."
I doubted the assertion a little; the dog's fangs, if it still had them, couldn't be very dangerous.
The Pole gestured for me to come in. In his dry austerity, he resembled a dog.
We crossed the darkened kitchen, but I saw a Formica countertop, a portable toaster on the rather antiquated stove, a cabinet without a door, and the buzzing of flies disturbed by the intrusion. The smell coming from the corner was acrid and strong. In what had been the dining room, he brought me a chair with a high back but flimsy legs. There was no other chair, which he sat in, resting an elbow on the table with a tablecloth of torn lace and an empty vase—all relics from good old days.
"How are you?" I asked, to break the ice.
-How do you see me?-
The ice remained.
"I wondered what would become of the Pole after everything that happened," I reflected.
He got up, turned on the ceiling light, which, although dim, illuminated the small room with its peeling paint walls amidst paintings that revealed the owner's good taste. The dining room chandelier was made of dirty, stately bronze. He took newspapers from a cabinet and placed them on the table.
-I read a lot, Beltrame. You're the only one who thinks about the reality of the past.
Should I feel happy? Was it a compliment? The dichotomy in her expression put me on the defensive.
-Thanks, I'll try.
-Yeah, it shows, kid. Excuse me, but you could be my son, so I'm taking the right to call you whatever I want.
-Thank you, Pole.

-You don't have to thank me for anything, and neither do I for you, kid. You and your old man are two brains without hearts.
I paused at that sentence. I had never stopped to listen to such a lucid and simple definition.
-Do you believe, Pole, that sentimental people are better for the country?
- No, Beltrame, sentimental people wreak havoc, the heart is treacherous and we don't know how to stop it.
"Shooting him," I said, and I don't know why, overwhelmed by this betrayal of my conscience.
He laughed, just a little. The dog, under the table, wagged its tail against the wooden floor.
-The human head and heart are two great liars who work to bring treasures to their kingdoms, and they wage war against each other and are left shattered, pure ruins.
I admired the unsubtle but poetic analogy. I didn't tell him, for fear of conceding too much. We were both fighting that night in Liniers.
She went to the kitchen. I heard pots and pans being stirred, something falling on the floor, and the dog barking.
"Is everything alright?" I asked aloud.
-Yes, I'm feeding the tiger.
I laughed at his gentle attempt to untangle the knot between us. He returned with two glasses and a bottle of wine. He offered it to me so I could read the label. In the dim light, I could only see an aged red, perhaps not very good, but not bad. He poured it, without offering to clink glasses.
"What's its name?" I asked, stroking the back of the dog that settled between my feet.
"I don't know. I found him at the bus stop one day, half-dead. He'd been hit by a car and they'd left him there. I thought he was dead until I heard a whimper. It was around six in the morning; I've kept that habit from when I had the workshop, so there wasn't much traffic. When I went out to buy bread, I saw him—I heard him, actually. I didn't get too close because I'm not one of those idiots who touches the wounds of injured people and asks, 'Does it hurt?' He didn't have any wounds, but he seemed to have broken ribs and a twisted leg. I could either let him die there or take him to a vet to have him put down. The second option would cost me, but what was I going to do, you know?"

I looked at the nameless dog, old and healthy, but above all grateful.
"What happened to your namesake?" I asked bluntly, ready to walk into the lion's den once and for all.
Liniers was out there at night, between the tracks.
The Pole had told me about the importance of understanding the past, because that was the only way to explain its expression. I thought of Liniers, the viceroy whose pride wasn't in holding the position, and of his execution for the good of the nascent nation. Argentine history is full of paradoxes like that, which never quite managed to be explained.
-If you don't know, you're a journalist.
-Virtue lies not in knowing, but in asking.
"That's a phrase your old man used. You've turned out to be a good apprentice, my dear. I suppose you haven't wasted any time asking around."
"Something," I said, "just to put on a show."
It's a good habit, this one of laughing at yourself and celebrating with someone else over a glass of wine. We toasted, this time more relaxed. The night of the trains progressed on the wall clock whose pendulum swung back and forth, marking the clatter of the train.
-What do you live on now, Pole?
He wasn't that old, even though he looked it, to have retired.
-From the rent for the workshop.
-But I saw it closed.
-And of course, what the tenants sell is not displayed in the shop window.
-You mean...
He raised his arms in a sign of resignation.
-So what can you do?
-But then...
The ensuing silence was riddled with evidence that shamed us both. We do what we can, even against ideas we once believed to be unchanging. That's what that silence could be interpreted as, if it had been necessary.
My namesake came to live with me after the trial, or rather the sham trial, regarding the clinic. For a while, he did nothing but try to preserve the memory of his brother-in-law and his sister. He went every day to the cemetery where his nephew was buried, if he was even there, because I

never believed they would actually bury him. The military wasn't easily intimidated by raids by the civilian justice system.
-And do you believe that Germán's body also disappeared?
"How should I know? You weren't around here, you didn't see the number of people coming and going every day for weeks, the covered stretchers, the red and black body bags, police, lawyers, soldiers, doctors, and all the curious onlookers, among whom the usual infiltrators mingled. Who could recognize them, tell me? Oh, and you, of course, the journalists who changed every day, the vans and cars where you spent the night keeping watch. People hid among the parked cars, in the tall grass beside the tracks, even in the Libertella yard many of those who knew a lot of things must have hidden, and they hid, of course, the objects and instruments they used. The ledgers too, because everything was recorded, I imagine. Otherwise, how could you keep up with people like the British and those from Eastern Europe , and the Americans, well, I won't even go there. Every transaction meticulously recorded, with names, surnames, times and minutes, and location." So well specified that it coincided with the similarity of what is legal, even turning the marginal into legality.
-Laws are just that, aren't they? The legalization of customs.
It was then that my namesake had Agustín's grave exhumed. He was naive, shy, a repressed adolescent until a very advanced age. Not even the crime had awakened him yet, until I hinted at all of that. I would talk to him, but he wouldn't listen, as if I specialized in inventing conspiracies. But one day we were eating at this very table and we heard an explosion in the street. We went out to the sidewalk to see what was happening; there was a shootout on Rivadavia between three patrol cars and several unmarked vehicles. All traffic was at a standstill, people were running and screaming. A neighbor, who had been giving us dirty looks ever since he moved in, perhaps confused by our resemblance, which, I have to admit, had become more pronounced against our will, crossed her arms and said, "It's the Krakovskys, I hope they kill them all." There had been a robbery at a business, or a raid on a brothel, or a drug-related shootout—we never knew for sure, but we didn't care. I think it was then that my namesake felt firsthand that the tragedy didn't come from the government, nor was it even the most intense source, but from everything around us: ordinary people, the neighbors who greeted us with suspicion, the passengers on the

train or buses, the street vendors who stood in the street offering something and looked us straight in the eye. Bitterness was everywhere and grew like dog shit. Later, he went to see Dr. Krakovsky, waited the appropriate amount of time in his office to feign indifference, until he was finally seen. Agustín Morales's empty grave was exhumed. I accompanied him to the cemetery very early that morning. The expert confirmed the absence of the body, but didn't know which of us to speak to; he knew when my namesake knelt down and began to pray. Augustinian theism had taken root in his heart, or perhaps in his mind's understanding, in a Kantian-type concept of the existence of God or a supreme deity, whatever that might be. Then he began to change. He tried to convince the Libertellas to exhume Germán's grave, but they flatly refused. The mother said something to the effect that her son had been born twice and that the third time was reserved for God. For them, Germán and his soul were already too far away, and they weren't going to allow him to be taken from them once more. Ariel kept insisting that they couldn't live believing in a mistaken idea. But it was no use. When he returned home, he told me that Leopoldo had replied that in Sicily his parents and grandparents had lived in hunger, so why couldn't they live with the idea that sustained them every day—that Germán had died and was resting in peace?

The bottle of wine was empty. The Pole asked:

-Did you have dinner?

I denied it, but told him not to bother.

-And who says I'm offering you anything? I'm the one who didn't eat anything. Let's go to the pizzeria on the corner. You're paying.

How could I refuse, if that's what I had been missing all those years?

We went outside and the dog followed us. The pizzeria was a seedy bar on the other side of the tracks, not on the corner like he'd said. There were sleepy bus drivers and railway office workers or level crossing guards amidst the smell of fainá and moscato, and spilled beer sticking to the tables. The dog went inside and lay down under the Polish man's chair. They already knew him. "A mozzarella pizza with fainá, boss," he ordered, "and two bottles of beer."

-They don't close all night, there's always someone there.

"Nice place," I said.

-This isn't your environment, Beltrame.

"What does it matter, Pole? One adapts, like your namesake. And tell me, what did you do next?"
He kept thinking, and drawing helped him with that. It seemed his plans were solidifying in those illustrations or pencil sketches, whatever. I'd look at them when I passed behind him; I didn't show them, but I didn't hide them either. They were getting uglier, darker, more incomprehensible. Like Batman comics, if you know what I mean.
He laughed mockingly and looked at me to see if I had fallen for it.
-It seems he had plans to become a superhero.
-Something like that. One day he went to talk to the lawyer again. From then on, he spent all day in the office or wherever the other man sent him. He became suspicious, distrustful, and even told me it would be best if we went undercover to confuse our enemies.
-And what were they?
"If you can't beat them, join them," he told me, mimicking the proverb. He joined the Krakovsky clan to fight other, greater enemies. He couldn't do it alone, and he realized—I think thanks to the lawyer's rhetoric—that the family wasn't as bad as it seemed. As in any good family, since we're on the subject of proverbs, there's a bit of everything. But the lawyer must have advised him to join forces with the intelligent ones, and the doctor knew how to choose them for his political campaigns.
The beer arrived, along with the board with the pizza and the fainá on top. Beautiful, I thought, a real beauty.
It was one in the morning, the last train of the day stopped. Through the window I saw the few passengers disperse along the platform and get off into the street.
-Dr. Krakovsky was planning something big, wasn't he?
Why are you making me talk, if you already know? Eat…
I would have listened to him, but my hunger for curiosity was too strong.
-I'm just saying what I think.
-And what do you suppose?
He ate his slice of pizza and fainá with his hand, and it was nice to see him, his graying beard getting wet with mozzarella.
-The plane crash.
He looked at me, wiping his lips with his napkin, and smiled.
-Okay, kid, now you tell me the rest of the story.

-He's asking too much of me, Polish guy.
"You're asking for much more than too much, kid, in this hovel where even the flies are spies." And he squashed one that had landed on the table with a strong, precise blow.
I was eating with my hands too, and I finished the second portion. I lit a cigarette and offered him one, but he took his pipe from the pocket of his old cardigan. And I began to tell a story, filling in the gaps with my imagination, paying attention to the slightest gestures on the Pole's face, which guided me.

10

First, he must have sketched out the whole plan in his sketchbook, with brief notes written in the margins, even using speech bubbles. I imagine that, in his inexperience with all these matters, he must have relied on the misgivings and precautions he'd learned from novels or movies. Many of them, of course, were wrong, but others are so taken for granted by those always involved, those who have grown up in that reality, that they tend to forget them, or dismiss them as circumstances left to chance.
In that way, anyone who saw the drawings would no longer find an illustrated adventure novel, a spy adventure, perhaps a story of war and sabotage.
He introduced her to Dr. Krakovsky, and the lawyer must have laughed to throw off the eavesdroppers in the waiting room. He must have congratulated him and wished him the best of luck. Those who saw him leave the office, crossing the room with the portfolio of drawings under his arm, his thin face, sparse beard, pale eyes, and slicked-back ash-colored hair, would have seen nothing more than a nobody, as they say. Scrawny, timid, and probably even gay.
Then weeks would pass, and the assigned days were postponed according to the whims of opportunity. First, there was the search for flights scheduled for the coming months, the long wait in the house across from

the military base, an empty house from whose yard he could glimpse the movements of the planes. Krakovsky's contacts were his guides: platoon assignments, regiment names, photos of documents, and boarding forms. Twice his plans were thwarted, the first time by fear, the second by rain that arrived with thunder and lightning, flooding the runways and suspending flights for more than a week . But on the third attempt, someone, from the lookout point at the entrance, saw him.

Two soldiers came to find him, asked him for documents, and since he had taken care not to carry them, they detained him for a background check. He was already inside and could observe most of the base's movements through the window of the room where he was being held, a room where kitchen and cleaning supplies were stored. Sitting in an ordinary chair, with a soldier guarding him, distracting himself from his boredom by swatting a fly he couldn't catch between the ceiling and the window, he saw the coming and going of the platoons, the cargo carts hauling up bundles of camouflage canvas, and then the crates of weapons, no doubt, and finally, the enormous, unlabeled containers, heavy because they were being carried by a crane to the entrance of the aircraft: the Hercules S-987-QTS.

Ariel must have imagined that the refrigerators were there, filled with bodies and body parts. He got up from his chair, desperate but feigning laziness with a yawn. He leaned against the window frame, disobeying the soldier's advice to sit down. Patience, the other man urged, thinking he was a madman, a degenerate who liked to spy on the young gendarmes. He even looked like a faggot, with an effeminate mannerism that existed simply because it contrasted with the brusque gestures and mannerisms, deliberately adopted by those who must appear to be what they are supposed to be so as not to stand out from the rest.

He placed his hands on the windowpane, clutching his head and peering through the grimy glass at the cranes' movements. The containers had dates on them—numbers, really, meant to mislead, but they were undoubtedly expiration or preservation dates. Agustín's organs might have been shipped in boxes like that, surrounded by ice or helium, preservation methods that were more or less old but still useful; it didn't matter. Soon they would be at their destination, an airport in Europe or Asia, in a few hours, where someone was waiting for them. Someone who would live off

what was stolen, without even knowing it, most likely. Perhaps a boy like Agustín, or perhaps the world's next dictator. Or perhaps somewhere in Latin America, a town of low houses and full of shantytowns around a mountain full of tropical vegetation, and with a mansion in the center, surrounded by walls hiding the swimming pools, the gardens cared for by gardeners, the cars, the pictorial treasures on the walls and the silk sheets in the bedrooms, where a woman awaited the birth of a child that the stork (effeminate Hercules, at last) would bring at a very high price, as high as the mountain where she lived.

He imagined hundreds of places, people, and situations in those few minutes, or few hours, that he spent waiting. He wasn't in a hurry, but he feigned impatience. He was a good actor, he told himself; shyness had taught him to hide it.

"How long are you going to keep me here?" he asked.

The other man didn't answer, resting the butt of his rifle on the floor. Outside, the activity increased as darkness fell on the base. A subordinate entered with papers, glanced at him, and seemed to compare what he saw in the document with Krakovsky's face. He was led to the office of a colonel, who sat behind his metal desk, surrounded by ashtrays overflowing with cigarette butts and smelling of lubricating oil—or so he thought.

-What are you looking for, Krakovsky?

Ariel shrugged.

-You know what I think? That you're a clown, that your family sent you to spy on us and get rid of you, or maybe it was just your idea, because you don't seem very tipsy, to be honest…

Ariel was in agreement with the colonel's conclusions, who had observed the play he had staged and followed the story.

"Take off your clothes," he told her.

Ariel began to unbutton his shirt. His bare torso was thin, slightly hunched, with scattered blond hairs on his chest and back, and you could even see his ribs and vertebrae. The others laughed, but not the colonel.

Then he bent down to take off his shoes and socks. After that, he stood up and began to undo his belt buckle, button, and zipper, and was left in his long underwear. The others laughed again.

"Everything," I said, the colonel insisted.

And suddenly, Ariel's eyes passed over the desk and saw the letterhead of the official checkbook.
Colonel Reynaldo Saravia.
The general's second son.
The doctor's brother.
His heart, until then serene and resigned, was stirred.
He undressed completely and threw his underwear on the desk.
The colonel looked at him, seemed to get angry, but then smiled at what he thought was boasting but was actually fury. He approached him and grabbed his scrotum with one hand.
-Your eggs won't do anyone any good, but you must have something good about you, you son of a bitch.
While the colonel held him down, the others hit him in the kidneys and put their fingers in his anus and then some metal that hurt him so much he lost consciousness.
He dreamed of rifle barrels, and then of artillery cannons firing on battlefields in a successive, kaleidoscopic mix of silent, black-and-white war films, with the added music of Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture or Beethoven's Wellington* . The symbiosis of music and history made him forget the pain of the penetration he had felt as a boy, many years before, at the hands of one or more men—he never knew for sure—when there was almost no resistance, because since birth he had learned to consider himself a lost soul without a specific body, and therefore could neither claim nor complain about the treatment of that borrowed body, which was not his own. Ariel Krakovsky's body was that of a fifteen-year-old who never grew up, because he had died before. Even if he were thirty or fifty years old, his body's memory did not extend beyond the inexperience of fifteen, and the wisdom he had gained had been immediate, in a single instant. When I was a boy, when I was ignorant, I lived in the fantasies of imagination. I didn't see the herd of rhinoceroses of reality coming across the savanna of the city: the street that was a remnant of bygone times in a field, a hotel, or a boat on the Paraná River. The era? Any, because repetition erases the singularities of time and creates the rhythm of habit.
He awoke in darkness, the distant, abstract drone of the Hercules's engine stalking him like a hidden flock of birds of prey. He knew they had brought him there, and the plane was already in flight. The plan was progressing,

slowly, patiently. He was still naked, handcuffed with his hands in front of him. He sniffed the air like a starving dog. There were other bodies that still retained the scent of life, but they were probably drugged, or even dead. Only he had been thrown out like a nagging dog that had been beaten and couldn't be left lying there, because sometimes even a dead dog can be evidence of a greater crime.

He knew the destination of the flight; the lawyer's henchmen had let him know.

London, at the Argentine embassy.

The London suburbs where the Rippers had forged enduring legends. The port of London where the fog shuffled the fate of the Black people brought on ships from Africa into the hands of pirates or coal mine owners or textile mill owners, or, with luck, some down-on-his-luck baron or marquess who sought not the exploitation of the body until death, but the pleasure of sex until exhaustion or murder. But that wasn't the most important thing in those times; it was distribution. London as a stopover, a stock exchange where the sale was traded not of men, but of fragments of men, of children, perhaps, whole children, of women chained by links of sex.

Hospitals, clinics, mansions, country houses, city apartments, factories, and brothels. The destinations, countless; the distances, imprecise because they were so immense, negligible because they were so impossible to calculate. The networks that connect the world were the destination map for that plane.

He struggled to his feet, using the crates and packaging that creaked under their plastic wrapping for support. He stepped in dirt, perhaps excrement from one of the bodies around him. It seemed to be a corner of the hangar where the unusable and the garbage were stored. The corpses that would be thrown into the sea mid-flight. Where were they now, he might have wondered, because he had no idea how long he had been asleep.

Suddenly, the plane lurched, lurching slightly despite its size . He realized they were landing, and through the intermittent announcements on the walls of the loudspeaker system, he heard that they had arrived in the Falklands. He stood there, waiting, shirtless and wearing long, wet, now-dry underwear, the stiff fabric chafing his bruised and battered skin. He was cold; a draft came through the ventilation tubes. He began to shiver.

He felt the movement of the hatches affecting the aircraft assembly. Trucks must be coming and going. The engines could be heard with a distant, muffled clarity. The compound door opened, the light blinded him, and he covered his face with his handcuffed hands. Soldiers were talking, searching for something, kicking and shoving with the butts of their rifles. A flashlight beam flickered back and forth, passing over him unnoticed. "There it is," said one, and the other answered him in English.

They grabbed him by the handcuffs and dragged him before he could take a step. They took him to a corridor and then to the large area where the trucks drove up the ramps. The light and the cold made him endure as he was dragged face down, his chest now scraped and wounded, his torn underwear sliding down until he was naked again, but this time no one laughed. They left him for a while, ignoring him, as if they thought him dead, but he knew they had a fate other than death in store for him. The trucks and cars came and went. He heard mumbled phrases in broken English; in the distance, he could see the ravaged plain or the cold steppe of one of the islands, the overcast sky, and the wind carrying its own fury into the Hercules.

Then he realized he didn't have much time or strength left to do what he had to do. Krakovsky's men had shown him the plane's blueprints, but he'd become disoriented after the beating, and the place where he'd left it didn't match his memory of the plan. Somewhere were the crates that had arrived in Buenos Aires after passing through Hungary, Warsaw, the northern coast of France, Northern Ireland, and then Rio de Janeiro, traveling by land, river, and jungle, Paraguay, and the Paraná River. The crates with the material that arrived in Buenos Aires—because Latin American subversives, and even less so Argentinians, don't dream of having much money—eventually reached Villa Luro, on the corner of a dead-end street next to the train tracks. Inside the mattress store "La Sorpresa," the bombs were assembled, with that material or other materials, because much of it arrived unusable or unusable, and Álvaro had to make do with homemade ingredients.

Where and how had he learned all that? At what point in his adolescence had he begun toying with the idea of anarchy? His temperament wasn't violent, but methodical and austere, so much so that it bordered on coldness of heart and judgment of mind. It must have been when we

separated and didn't see each other for many years. Improvised courses with pamphlets in Russian translated into English and then Italian, printed versions to mislead, hidden inside business ledgers, in sales slips filled with illegible numbers and old dates. The mattresses would allow him to practice without drawing too much attention over the years: the noise of the train at all hours masked much, the screeching of the sewing machines his father had bought, and the walls of the workshop covered with mattresses like in a madhouse. The smell of glue, of burnt fabrics, of the grime people left on the mattresses concealed the chemical combinations. Thinking of Álvaro as Krakovsky explained the whole plan to him those afternoons in the office, he admired the intelligence of the twin who had survived. There were many revolutionary struggles, but for Álvaro there was, perhaps, only one and only revenge.

He stayed on the floor, waiting for things to calm down. Evening was falling on the island, and the darkness was gradually filled with the lights of the base facilities, which, as far as he could see, were nothing more than two buildings on either side of the asphalt or gravel runway. The cargo stopped being loaded, and the main door swung open and closed with a loud bang. In the darkness, they lifted him by the arms and dragged him to the same spot as before, but no, it wasn't the same. He smelled the gasoline or diesel from the trucks. They left him lying there, speaking in hushed tones as they drove off with a clash of gunfire, and the plane took off again.

There was a lamp on the ceiling, dim, but enough to get his bearings. He was surrounded by several rows of camouflaged trucks, their hoods still warm, spilled fuel everywhere, and the smell of oil. The rear doors were locked. He tried to remove the tarpaulins from the back cabs of some others, but they were so tightly tied that he didn't have the strength. He knew, anyway, that they contained weapons and war materiel, all the equipment the armed forces use. Camouflage, of course, for the trucks that had entered Buenos Aires earlier. The stench of decay was everywhere; he even saw the Falkland Island flies, if there were any, entering in disordered swarms, solitary as always, selfish as they tend to be.

He then smelled the acrid odor of urine, his own in his dirty underwear, but the smell came and went like flies hovering over his head full of rubble. The smell of formaldehyde.

If he'd had a match, that would have been enough, he thought, but he knew he was ignorant of such things. In the event of a fire, that kind of plane had warning signals and ways to fight the fire before any greater danger.
That's why Álvaro Libertella's bombs. Camouflaged inside anything, in any form: a package of soldiers' sneakers for when they changed into civilian clothes, or a box of books or comics. Among so much hidden or permitted material, written records often failed, letters became confused, and numbers were altered without anyone noticing. Perhaps some unknown Krakovsky—because there were so many of them they were born like rabbits—would switch places with another, and so on, and then realize that the bombs must be in the trucks that had come up to the island. How can one not admire the Krakovskys' unhurried pace, who, with the virtue of patience and the discretion of the indifferent, wandered around, looked without seeing, listened without hearing, waiting for a bus, playing with a stray dog, smoking on a doorstep, reading on a park bench, or standing in line on the sidewalk outside a bank. The area around a military base is heavily guarded, but where there are many people, distraction reigns.
Ariel imagined what hadn't been explained to him because it wasn't necessary: the flight to the islands, who knows when and by whom, waiting for the Hercules flight to arrive in a small house on the island, doing any old job, living with a *Falkland Islander* or making friends with any foreigner. The islands were a mystery, and hidden in the Atlantic fog, they gave rise to the creation of myths.
He sat down, parched, swallowing his own saliva and the blood from his cracked lips. He closed his eyes, trying to remember. The numbers he had learned surfaced through the onomatopoeia of their sounds. A combination of numbers whose written sound combined letters in a kind of anagram. And when he opened his eyes to the dim light, he wondered why he'd gone around in circles so many times. His answer was hidden stupidity, never greater than the obviousness exposed for all to see.

Arbitrary Knowledge , the British company that had been wreaking economic havoc in Latin America for a long time. Presidents had demanded investments, and there the company was. In the beginning there were trains, they said, just as in the beginning there was light in the world. But now, what was it all about? Multinationals that were involved in everything, so much so that nothing could be defined. Marketing goods, food,

healthcare, laboratories, construction, finance, tourism, and so many other things to the point of absurdity.
There were the trucks with the company logo. But there were so many, too many, maybe a hundred trucks inside the giant belly of the plane. Which one to look in, with his hands cuffed and exhausted and in pain?
Then I looked at the Krakovsky in front of me, listening attentively, of the same breed as the rest of the clan, because that's what they were by now, a breed with diverse species and genders: the murderers, the unscrupulous, the troubled, the bitter, the innocent (there must be some somewhere), the simply dishonest, and then the unclassified tangle. I wondered if Ariel Krakovsky, the shy man I'd been told about, an intellectual dedicated to humanism and thought, indifferent to practical and manual labor, even to the daily grind of lifting bales or mattresses to earn a living, like this man before me, aged but still with strong hands and arms, could have endured everything I'd been imagining on that plane crossing, or attempting to cross, the Atlantic.
He had to search one by one through the gaps between the tarpaulins and the sheet metal, or enter the open cabs and look for some nook to see the cargo in the rear compartment. They hadn't given him license plate or chassis numbers; too much to memorize and too dangerous to carry around knowing that torture might make him reveal even what he didn't know.
The flight over the Atlantic was calm and serene, but inside it was cold, perhaps as cold as outside. He didn't know how much time had passed until he finally found what he was looking for. The truck, exactly like the others, maybe older, without license plates, its windshield covered in propaganda stickers and military markings from annual inspections. He climbed into the cab; the upholstery was falling apart and the foam was sprouting like fungus. In the glove compartment were tools and papers, most of them old, some with records from cities in Argentina and Brazil, and also from Paraguay. A photo of Stroessner was tucked among the papers. I saw that photo clearly, and I put my hands to my head, looking at Krakovsky in that pizzeria, while he nodded and urged me to continue my story.
With a knife he cut the tarpaulin, with wrenches he loosened the nuts and lifted the metal sheet that revealed the empty truck, except for the two sculptures that stood like works of art, industrially and metallurgically manufactured. Upright metals, welded together, wrapped in cables of

various colors that in the dim light all looked the same, and at the base, nothing more than an ordinary clock, or perhaps a Rolex, that some good general had donated to the cause.
All the paraphernalia imagined by writers and filmmakers was gathered in those two sculptures that would soon explode. But they were still dead, serving as objects of admiration for Krakovsky's gaze, lying in the cockpit seat, his arms draped over the backrest and his head resting on them, as if he were in a modern art museum contemplating the latest work of a mad artist, like almost all of them, creating the forms of destruction.
He squeezed between the metal, fell to the floor of the truck. He walked on his knees like a pilgrim toward an altar. That's what the two sculptures were, images of contemporary gods captured perfectly by the artist: Álvaro Libertella was the creative genius of a poetics of chaos.
He had been told, however, the connections he had to make with precision. One cable to another in a specific sequence, then the triple joining of the loose ends, clues to an assembly typical of the motor of any household appliance, and finally, the coordinated metamorphosis of both sculptures into a monster with a life of its own, born in the womb of a giant flying over the ocean.
I let my imagination run wild, prompted by the cries of a prehistoric bird pregnant with offspring.
But those were fallacies that distorted the tragedy of a solitary war: a man against an airplane, or a man against a winged hell.
The souls led, the bodies moved, the alchemies transformed, the gold diminished.
All of that vanished in the explosions that followed the initial blast, the primordial spark that Krakovsky had ignited. One after another, they destroyed parts, fragments, vital points of the giant, which disappeared as if gnawed by rats that had grown inside its metal intestines, until finally it fell and sank its remains into underwater graveyards.

Krakovsky stared at me, more indifferent to the accuracy of my story than to the emotion revealed by my face and the trembling of my hands, which tried to hide their embarrassment by playing with the now empty beer glass, which he soon took it upon himself to refill.

-You're wonderful, Bautista, you deserve the wine they served to poets when they sang to the gods of Olympus.
It wasn't sarcasm, it was his way of not giving too much away.
But how did this man, accustomed to the mattress workshop, know about the Homeric poems?
It was three in the morning, the bar was empty except for the two of us and a dog.
"You can stay at my house for the night, if you want," he told me.
It was too late to drive, even though it wasn't a long trip, and besides, I felt dizzy. I didn't ask her if my story was true when we left, walking toward the tracks to cross the railroad crossing. I would ask her at home, when we got there.
But before we could cross to the avenue, a policeman stopped us.
"Documents," he said.
He was a big guy, who had probably seen a lot of street life and a lot of men, and who for some reason was not sheltered from the cold in a police station, but on a suburban sidewalk on a night foreshadowing death.
He looked at the identity documents with the small battery-powered flashlight. He seemed a little surprised and shone the light on Krakovsky's face.
-What are you doing here? You were already warned not to leave your pigsty.
I looked at them both, trying to read their faces. Why were they watching the Pole, if he was just an old textile workshop mechanic?
He returned the documents to us, without looking at me for long, and said:
-You, Krakovsky, stay inside if you don't want to get thrown in jail next time.
As we crossed the avenue, he stopped me before I stepped onto the sidewalk. I put one hand to my forehead and grabbed a lamppost with the other. I vomited on the sidewalk. Ariel gave me a tissue.
-Here, and don't worry, it's torn and old, throw it away after cleaning it.
So I did, and I sat down on the curb. Next to me, he started smoking. We sat on the sidewalk like two vagrants content with the brief dreams of a joint, until the first train of the early morning arrived to collect the night's corpses.
"Why didn't you tell me I was wrong?" I asked him.

-Why? Everything was almost exactly as you described it.

-But the man…

-The man doesn't matter, only the result does.

-But the Pole…

-The Pole always felt too much affinity for water, and in the end he succumbed to it.

May - December 2025

Belén de Escobar

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